Violence and video games

by Mike Adler

Buzz hits the leather-clad woman again and again, enveloping her head in a haze of blood. The screaming crowd pushes her back into the ring, waving money and pumping fists. She hits back, kicks with her high-heeled boots, but Buzz stabs her with a knife until she collapses and turns a pale grey - dead.

Cut to the next scene: Buzz is raised on a forklift while fanatical followers rave in the background. As money piles at his feet, he receives a "brutality bonus" for his latest match. Welcome of the world of Pit-Fighter, a video game at a Carleton University arcade.

As digital sound and digitized pictures increase realism, video games Canadian students play are becoming more violent - especially towards women. Games have been removed from Carleton and other universities across the country, and at least one student government now has a strong policy against violent games. How did we get from Space Invaders and Asteroids to fighting with knives and bludgeoning with iron pipes?

"That's the culture of the kids these days, that's what they're into," says Mary Fujihara, a public relations officer for Atari Games in Sunnyvale, Calif., the company which makes Pit-Fighter. "We don't emphasize it (in our games), but if you look at any arcade, you'll see a good percentage of them being kick-punch, hand-to-hand combat games."

Karate Champ, the first of these "hand-to-hand" games, was an unqualified success several years ago, Fujihara says. On its screen, identical human figures use standard karate movements to score points, which are announced by a short, cartoonish judge with a fan. Winning players are visited at the end of a match by a small female figure with a heart overhead.

"For three years there was nothing but kung fu fighter games," says Fujihara, "and then hand-to-hand went on to become streetfighting."

The last fighting game to become especially successful, she says, was Taito's Double Dragon, introduced three years ago.

Double Dragon begins with a man viciously punching a woman in the stomach and carrying her off. To "get her back," players use their figures, Hammer and Spike, to punch and kick their way through an army of men and women. Both

As digital sound and digitized pictures increase realism, video games Canadian students play are becoming more violent - especially towards women.   Photo by Dave Smith

sides can use assorted weapons - knives, barrels, baseball bats, and hooks. If two players are left alive after killing the woman's abductors, they must plummel each other to be the sole recipient of her love, while she remains bound, suspended from the ceiling of a room by a rope.

The game was banned from a college put at the University of Toronto in 1988, after student councillors responded to complaints that it was sexist and needlessly violent. It seems very popular at Carleton, however - judging from its year-long stay at the residence arcade - and it has recently been joined by Capcom USA's Final Fight, a newer and even more violent cousin.

In almost every video game in Carleton's arcades, women are either victims to be retrieved or amazons to be slaughtered. In contrast, the images players control are usually male.

Fujihara defends the use of "Angel", the female opponent in Pit-Fighter, saying it is part of the game's fantasy of "underground fighting" and no one has complained to Atari about it.

"She's just another character," says Trevor Ydreos, a first-year arts student who claims to have defeated all his imaginary opponents in Pit-Fighter. He added he doesn't feel differently about the woman than any other character in the game.

"We put (her) in there because we've heard kids say that they need to fight girls, or (to) be a girl and fight guys or other girls," Fujihara

says. "It's not a sexist thing to them. They see (the woman) as a fighter, but they almost think it's funny that it's a lady, and she's fighting them."

Other, similar representations of women in video games aren't hard to find.

Players of Golden Axe must hack at blonde amazons to reach their goal. If they die, the amazons fall over with a groan. If they kill a player, they stand and laugh, breasts shaking above tightly-laced corsets.

Before firing a replica gun at as many of the "enemy" as possible in Operation Wolf, players watch non-combatants, such as crying women and nurses with stretchers, parade out and ask not to be shot. If they are shot, however, it makes no real difference to the player's main objective, which is to get as far as possible through the game's sequence.

Crime Fighters pits players against the usual assortment of inner-city goons a whip-wielding, leather-clad women. Their goal is to kill a man who is a kidnapper or pimp. What is unclear is whether the group of women behind bars in the game's final sequence are free to go, or if they are now prisoners of the players.

Most games now accept extra quarters to extend play after a player has been defeated, leaving a task unfinished. In Toki, a woman appears and pleads for life as a clock runs out, choking back animated tears running down her face.

"If you don't keep playing, I'll be killed," her speech balloon reads. Players who respond by quickly

inserting a quarter can continue their game; those who do not, condemn the woman to death.

Character background and storyline are receiving more attention in fighting games, Fujihara says, because players who watch action movies want similar characters and goals.

Final Fight features a lengthy prologue, complete with personal profiles of its three male "heroes," Cody, Guy, and Mike Haggar, and their justification for a rampage - to rescue their sweetheart or friend or daughter, and to make an army of thugs "pay."

Even the thugs have names, including one who strongly resembles professional wrestler Andre the Giant.

Pit-Fighter is preceded by digitized sequences showing characters Buzz, Ty, and Kato doing things such as performing Tai Chi on a mountaintop and knocking other men's heads together before fighting to the death for money.

"The graphics are better (than those in Double Dragon)," Ydreos says of Pit-Fighter. "It's more like a movie."

Despite the vigilante role often encouraged for the players, the games do not seem to communicate a greater respect for personal property than they do for human life.

Players of Final Fight are encouraged to get bonus points in one sequence by demolishing a car with an iron pipe, seemingly for the sheer destructive joy of it.

Video games are a multi-billion dollar industry these days. They are tremendously popular and very profitable, attractive to students and cash starved student governments alike.

There is at least one student government, however, which has a policy barring violent video games from its campus. The University of Winnipeg student council effectively banned all video games last month, "for which players commit violence against human images, (or) which include sexist, racist, or demeaning connotations."

The policy allows games already on the campus to be "phased out" over a one-year period.

"The promotion of violence doesn't really belong in an intellectual setting (like a university)," says U of W council president Kyle Briggs, who doesn't think the association should "be making money off violence. If students still want the violent games, he added, they can go to off-campus arcades instead.

Kelley Castle, coordinator of Carleton's Women's Centre, agrees with the University of Winnipeg ban, arguing that video games are getting more violent because people want them that way.

"I think it's obvious that not

only do we get desensitized to whatever forms of violence we start off with and we want more, but also there is the increasing prevalence of women being the object of the violence," she says.

Castle says this violence will worsen as women make advances in education and non-traditional jobs and men feel their "privileges" are being threatened.

Carleton's student governments don't have policies dealing with video games, according to council administration vice-president Miranda Lawrence, who doesn't think the U of W council policy is practical enough to work at Carleton. It's difficult to find a precise definition of which games are offensive, she says, but she agreed games with graphic violence or violence against women should be removed. Currently, decisions to remove individual video games under the council's jurisdiction can only be made by the president.

During the last year, Carleton's council acted to remove games twice after people complained - once from the association's Unicentre Arcade, and once from Oliver's pub.

Match 'em Up, the pub game, displays various body parts, a whip, and the words "beat me" and "deep throat" on its screen. Playboy's 35th Anniversary, a pinball machine removed from the Unicentre Arcade, flashes suggestive messages and moans electronically when balls hit certain triggers on its playing surface. Through the machine was reported to be a "good earner," complaints from women who found it offensive convinced the council president that it was not worth having. It also does not allow the sale of Playboy Magazine in its Unicentre Store.

Lawrence says she is convinced the portrayal of women in many of the games reinforces gender stereotypes and may lead to harassment of women or actual violence.

"I would feel a lot safer not having to walk by the arcade and hear men hoot at these games," she added.

"I don't agree that a good argument for not (Implementing a policy) is that it will be difficult," Castle says. "Of course it will be difficult, but we have to make some kind of effort, and I don't think it's impossible."

Castle argues that the student council must already have criteria in mind for deciding whether a game should be removed, and more can be found by asking knowledgeable women what is sexist, and women of color what is racist.

"I think it's really easy to try and tell whether there is violence involved in (a video game)," she says. "If you're killing something or if you're shooting something, then that's violence. (CUP)