

Thumb-Bangers: Exploring the Cultural Bond between Video Games and Heavy Metal

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Abstract

Heavy metal and video games share an almost simultaneous birth, with Black Sabbath's debut album in 1970 and Nolan Bushnell's *Computer Space* in 1971. From Judas Priest's 'Freewheel Burning' music video in 1984 to Tim Schafer's *Brütal Legend* in 2009, the exchanges between these two subcultures have been both reciprocal and exponential. This chapter will present a historical survey of the bond between video games and heavy metal cultures through its highest-profile examples. There are two underlying reasons for this symbiosis: 1) the historical development and popular dissemination of the video game came at an opportune time, first with the video game arcades in the 1970s and early 1980s, and then with the Nintendo Entertainment System, whose technical sound-channel limitations happened to fall in line with the typical structures of heavy metal; 2) heavy metal and video games, along with their creators and consumers, have faced similar sociocultural paths and challenges, notably through the policies set in place by the PMRC and the ESRB, and a flurry of lawsuits and attacks, especially from United States congressmen, that resulted in an overlapping of their respective spaces outside dominant culture. These reasons explain the natural bond between these cultural practices, and the more recent developments like Last Chance to Reason's *Level 2* let us foresee a future where new hybrid creations could emerge.

Key Words: Video games, heavy metal, history, violence, subcultures, chiptunes.

1. Of Pinballs and Wizards: The Early Exchanges

Heavy metal and video games share an almost simultaneous birth, with Black Sabbath's debut album in 1970 and Nolan Bushnell's *Computer Space* in 1971. Since the birth of these two subcultures in the early seventies, a growing number of interactions between metal music and video games can be observed. From the invasion of the arcade spaces by hard rock music and themes to the formation of new hybrid creations at the dawn of the new millennium, these cultural phenomena have walked hand in hand.

The first links were envisioned in terms of licensing. For example, a number of hard rock musicians sought to connect to and enlarge their audiences by providing game music soundtracks that could be heard in bars, pool rooms, amusement parks and arcades. Associating themselves with pinball machines and video games served as a way of ensuring their presence in the land of *Gorgar*,¹ *Pinbot*, *Pac-Man* and *Defender*. In 1978, Kiss partnered with Bally to release *Kiss*, a classic

pinball machine in which the main bumpers are the four personas of the band members. The same year Ted Nugent imitated them, and soon AC/DC and Guns and Roses were to have machines of their own.² The culminating point of this association with the pinball industry was Bally's 1987 *Heavy Metal Meltdown*, which consolidated the marriage of the heavy metal imagery with the game-playing habits of many metalheads. From then on, there was no doubt about the appetite of the metal community for electronic and video games. In this respect, we cannot skip over the significance of the video arcade as a site of resistance for teenagers and other outcasts, away from the dominant culture. A central aspect of this, it could be argued, was because '[t]he video game arcade [in this period] becomes a social arena within which hegemonic masculinity can be experienced and practised.'³ Also, in the mid-1980s, bands like Judas Priest and Rush did not hesitate to portray the male subjects of their music videos as arcade gamers and misfits, rather than the classic long-haired headbanger dressed in black studded leather.⁴ From the early age to the golden age of arcade games, video games and Heavy Metal subculture seemed to share participants and adepts who were ready to embrace them together.

2. The Beast from the East: Nintendo Metal?

In 1985, metalheads discovered a significant number of new bands: there was Exodus in April, Megadeth in June, Kreator in October, and Helloween in December. They also discovered another significant cultural force: Nintendo in October. At first sight, this temporal proximity may be seen as a continuation of the bonds we have already shown between video games and heavy metal music, but in reality the context is very different. Nintendo's strategy for conquering the North American market hinged on two crucial points: tight quality control mechanisms, and a change in the target audience. While the arcade and home video games of the 1970s were marketed to the young adult population, Nintendo explicitly targeted children. This cultural shift entailed a number of restrictions which the game publisher imposed on third-party game developers. Any game to be featured on the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) console had to be thoroughly checked by Nintendo to get its contents approved. The list of formally excluded features included sexually suggestive or explicit content, random, gratuitous and/or excessive violence, profanity or obscenity, or anything encouraging the use of illegal drugs, smoking materials, and/or alcohol.⁵

Given Nintendo's choice of target age group and its stringent limitations on game content, we might reasonably assume that the video game and heavy metal culture parted company at this point. Yet surprisingly, many popular games on the NES feature prominent rock and metal structures and overtones in a large portion of their in-game music. The most upfront representative of this trend is Capcom's video game character and franchise *Mega Man*, whose original Japanese name *Rock Man* stands for rock music. Indeed, *Mega Man's* high-speed, high-energy

mix of electronic sounds featuring twin melodic leads driven by rapid bass triplets and relentless percussion suggests a metal musical derivation, as Patrick Todd ('Bucky') writes: 'While I'm not sure that the composers have ever come forth and divulged their thoughts and influences on writing *Mega Man 2*, many fans will cite Iron Maiden as having had to be influential.'⁶ It is also notable that Todd seems to take for granted the cultural ties between video games and metal music when he discusses the soundtrack of *Castlevania 2: Simon's Quest* (Konami, 1988): 'Less subtle in their musical influences, and likely to please a lot of video game nerds, are Bloody Tears and Dwelling of Doom. These tracks are some of the most metal sounding tunes in the *Castlevania* series.'⁷

But why did metal-sounding music appear on the soundtrack of video games targeted at pre-teens? While this can certainly be attributed to the popularity of metal during the mid-1980s, there are deeper technological forces at play here. The NES's hardware limited game soundtracks to two monophonic pulse 'instruments' playing melodic lines, a bass line, and a crude percussive layer made from white noise. As a result, chord-based music was very hard to successfully implement.⁸ Instead, the platform's hardware naturally favored musical forms based on melody and counterpoint, such as the Baroque and the Renaissance period.⁹ Mixing the technologically-determined Baroque influences with the pragmatically-determined need for sustained, driven rhythm to get the player moving through action games made heavy metal the *de facto* reference genre. As the children exposed to heavy metal structures and aesthetics through Nintendo video games matured, so did the video game industry, and the next generations of consoles would further the links between these two subcultures.

3. The Larger Cultural Tie-Ins: Riding on a Crazy Train

New formats allowing exchange and collaboration emerged throughout the 1990s and 2000s, beginning with the appearance of sampling, synthesised sound and the General MIDI standard in 1991. Many games further extended their heavy metal tendencies, both for original games and music such as *Final Fantasy Mystic Quest*¹⁰ and for games that licensed well-known songs, namely *Rock and Roll Racing*.¹¹ From 1993 onwards, the popularization of the CD-ROM drive allowed game developers to include professionally produced tracks that conformed to the Red Book audio standard.¹² Popular games such as *Grand Theft Auto 4* gave an important place in their music soundtrack to new and old school Heavy Metal. And the inclusion of hard disk drives in consoles, with Microsoft's Xbox in 2001, allowed gamers to listen to custom soundtracks while playing their favourite games.

Finally, gamers were offered the chance to merge gameplay and heavy music in 1998, when Konami released its first *Guitar Freaks* arcade, the Japanese ancestor to the modern *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* franchises. While such games host heavy metal music as an import, the reverse is also true. As the boys of the 1980s

have grown into men, they, like most teenagers, have started picking up instruments to play music - the kind of music they had listened to when growing up. Just as music or rhythm video games can host heavy metal, so can heavy metal host video games. One of the highest-profile examples of this crossover is the speed power metal band DragonForce, that owes much of its mainstream popularity to the inclusion of their song 'Through the Fire and Flames' on *Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock* in 2007. Time and again, DragonForce guitarist Herman Li has cited video games as a major influence: '... you can call us video game metal [...video game music], that's one of our influences. ... that's why the songs are so melodic-inspired by arcade games.'¹³ The music video for the DragonForce song, 'Operation Ground and Pound,' eloquently shows the band's two guitarists locked in a guitar soloing duel that is transposed as a video game fight, with each contestant manically mashing buttons to perform 'combos.'¹⁴

Li and co. are merely the most visible of an entire generation which increasingly integrates its love of video games within other cultural spaces. In the United States, for example, many video game cover bands have emerged on the 'chiptunes'¹⁵ music scene, and there is no shortage of metal there, with bands such as the Minibosses, the NESKimos, the Megas, Armcannon, Metroid Metal, Year200X and Descendants of Erdrick. One of these bands, Powerglove, even went on North American tours with iconic international power metal bands HammerFall, Sonata Arctica, and...DragonForce, thereby completing the circle of influence and mutual exchange between heavy metal and video games. All of which suggests that it is not by chance that '[f]or American teenagers, heavy metal became the soundtrack to a cultural revolution that included cable television and the first home computers and arcade video games.'¹⁶ The socio-cultural context, cultural synergies, and even technical constraints of the video game hardware, have forged the links between video games and heavy metal, allowing an unprecedented degree of overlap across a commonly shared middle-ground. Unfortunately, in regard to the rest of society, that middle ground is an excluded middle, which means that, as we will see in the next section, video games face the same controversies, conflicts, and scapegoating as heavy metal.

4. Heavy Metal and Video Games: The Evil that Men Do

I suspect that the rock addiction, particularly in the absence of strong counterattractions, has an effect similar to that of drugs.¹⁷

The strongest critics of heavy metal are the same groups and individuals who are strongly critical of anything that smacks of free thought or even freedom of choice.¹⁸

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, creators and consumers of heavy metal music and video games have faced a general outcry from the political class, right-wing militants, university researchers and religious organisations, to name a few.¹⁹ Controversy, attacks and lawsuits have been covered intensively by the mass media helping to construct a moral panic, especially in the United States. As Amy Binder wrote in 1993, an 'ideological frame' is created around mass media discourses to make sense of issues that adult readers desperately want to comprehend without introducing socio-economic factors.²⁰ We will examine some details about the American 'ideological frame' that has surrounded the activities of gamers and metal enthusiasts since the mid-eighties.

In September 1985, a group led by Tipper Gore, the well-known wife of Senator Al Gore, presented itself to the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. The group was there to inform the committee members about the 'decadent state of rock music lyrics,' especially those of heavy metal music.²¹ The members of the group called themselves the Parents Music Resource Center. In their testimony and in a list of songs they called the 'filthy fifteen,' they accused heavy metal bands AC/DC, Mötley Crüe, Venom, WASP and Twisted Sister, of being responsible for the increased depravation in American society. As they put it: 'While a few outrageous recordings have always existed in the past, the proliferation of songs glorifying rape, sadomasochism, incest, the occult, and suicide by a growing number of bands illustrates this escalating trend that is alarming.'²²

After this widely mediated outing,²³ the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) agreed to stamp every record that made the 'evil list' of the PMRC with a 'parental advisory' sticker. This agreement led to further self-regulating measures, which targeted mainly heavy metal and rap records, resulting in the removal of those products from the shelves of large American retailers like Wal-Mart and Sears.²⁴

Soon the debate shifted to the problem of sex and violence in the entertainment industry, and video games joined metal music in further round of scapegoating. Games like *Mortal Kombat*, *Night Trap* and *Splatterhouse 3* were the targets of Senators Joseph Lieberman and Herb Kohl in an hearing about video game violence and the corruption of society.²⁵ This resulted in an obligation for the industry to work on a ratings system within a year, without which the government itself would have intervened with a system of its own. The Entertainment Software Rating Board was born of this obligation.²⁶ Unfortunately, in 1999, the Columbine School Massacre put the debate back on the media agenda, with some fallacious links drawn between games like *Doom* and American school shooting cases by politicians and activists like Jack Thompson.²⁷ The videogames historian, Heather Chaplin wrote in *Smartbomb*: 'After Columbine, the first person shooter became, in most people's minds, what video games are.'²⁸ The media played a part in this 'framing,' helping to suggest that metal music and game subcultures could

somehow explain violence, depravation and delinquent behaviour in American society. Even the supposedly most credible entities in society, university researchers, were summoned to put more fuel onto the fire.

The most renowned researcher who contributed to maligning heavy metal music and video games is Craig A. Anderson. A distinguished professor of liberal arts and sciences in the department of psychology at Iowa State University, he conducted numerous controversial²⁹ studies on media violence and their effects on youth.³⁰ His first target in the eighties was rock music videos and lyrics, especially from rap and heavy metal sources. As the nineties progressed he aimed at video games and include them in his account of a 'youth violence crisis' occurring in modern US society. On March 21, 2000, he was asked by US Senator Sam Brownback to testify at the hearing on the impact of interactive violence on children, where he claimed 'young people who play lots of violent video games behave more violently than those who do not.'³¹

5. Trial by Fire: Breaking (and Making) the Law

Armed with these arguments, congressmen and lobbyists, with the support of academics and parents in mourning, tried to deal a fatal blow by dragging to court heavy metal and video game creators. For heavy metal, they used a strategy based on the denunciation of explicit lyrics and backmasking techniques (hidden messages) that supposedly 'triggered' youths to engage in violent or self-destructive behaviour.³² For video games, the research of Dr. Anderson and his peers, combined with the subjective association of first person shooter games with school shooting tragedies, composed the case for the prosecution. They faced a fierce advocate in the since-disbarred attorney Jack Thompson, who tried to gain a measure of political capital by filing lawsuits against video game creators and publishers. He once declared: '*In every school shooting, we find that kids who pull the trigger are video gamers.*'³³ In 1999, he filed a \$33 million lawsuit against Time Warner Inc., Polygram Film Entertainment Distribution Inc., Palm Pictures, Island Pictures, New Line Cinema, Nintendo, Sony, Atari and Sega on behalf of the parents of Michael Carneal, who was sentenced to life in prison for his act.³⁴ Frequently using the term 'murder simulator,' Thompson tried to put the blame on video games for many massacres in the United States, notably those of Columbine, Heath High School and Virginia Tech. None of Thompson's attempts in court succeeded, and he started to lose credibility around 2005 after he had filed too many dismissed lawsuits within a two-year span. From the increasingly detailed graphical depiction of violence in games like *Mortal Kombat* (Acclaim 1992) to the subversive social commentary of *Grand Theft Auto 3* (Rockstar North, 2002), video games and heavy metal have faced the same hardships.³⁵ While this connection may be contingent rather than strictly causal, it has resulted in the two subcultures taking a similar stance, aside and apart from mainstream culture.

6. The Future: We Have Got Another Thing Coming

United, united, united we stand, United we never shall fall.

United, united, united we stand, United we stand one and all.

Judas Priest, 'United' (1980)

In desperate need of scapegoats, Gore, Lieberman, Anderson, Thompson and others contributed to bringing closer together two subcultures that were already resonating. For now, they will need to keep working together and continue to be the 'proud pariahs'³⁶ of our society. Some game designers and metal artists used these cultural links to their advantage. Renowned designer Tim Schafer created *Brütal Legend*, a video game dedicated to glorifying headbanger culture. Legends like Rob Halford, Ozzy Osbourne and Lemmy Killmister collaborated on the project. In another way, music band Last Chance To Reason teamed up with acclaimed indie developer Tom Vine and pixel artist Francis Coulombe to create a concept in which a game inspired by the first generation of Nintendo products, along with an original musical score, will be joined together in a hybrid project called Level 2. As the 21st century progresses the two subcultures seem poised to stand side by side for at least another forty years.

Notes

¹ Both a pinball machine by Williams (1979) and a song by Helloween.

² Respectively Rockin' Lightnin' (Bally 1984) and GUNZBOOOMB (Bally 1985).

³ Nola Alloway and Pam Gilbert, 'Video Game Culture: Playing with Masculinity, Violence and Pleasure', in *Wired-Up: Young People and the Electronic Media* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 9.

⁴ See Judas Priest's 'Freewheel Burning' (1984) and Rush's 'Subdivisions' (1982).

⁵ See Steven A. Schwartz and Janet Schwartz, *The Parent's Guide to Video Games* (New York: Prima Publications, 1994).

⁶ <http://good-evil.net/features/top-30-nes-soundtracks-02-mega-man-2>.

⁷ <http://good-evil.net/features/top-30-nes-soundtracks-06-castlevania-ii>.

⁸ Some composers resorted to rapid arpeggios to achieve that effect. Examples of chord-based music can be found here and there, but are sparse in the overall NES library. One notable instance is the soundtrack of *Batman Returns* (1992) and its well-defined metal guitar riffs, particularly evident on a track titled 'Following the Circus Train' by the uploader: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzrAN_ajPVY.

⁹ See for instance Knud Jeppesen, *Counterpoint: The Polyphonic Vocal Style of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992 [1939]).

¹⁰ The soundtrack is almost entirely based on heavy metal or rock guitars. The purest example would be the boss battle theme: but it is quite common

for any video game battle theme to include metal elements. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2vEakoOIdU>. Listening to the ambient music track that plays while exploring the Lava Dome dungeon gives a better sense of the omnipresence of metal through the whole soundtrack: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6KkmCF5Iao>.

¹¹ The game features, among others, MIDI renditions of ‘Paranoid’ (Black Sabbath, 1970) and ‘Highway Star’ (Deep Purple, 1972).

¹² The Red Book standard (thus named for the colour of the actual book’s binding) is a set of technical specifications, developed by Sony and Philips in 1980, for producing standardised audio CD-ROMS.

¹³ <http://www.metalunderground.com/interviews/details.cfm?newsid=8207>.

¹⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YscMfLMiha4>. (A ‘combo’ in the fighting game genre is a combination of moves linked together so that they inflict devastating damage to the opponent.)

¹⁵ Chiptunes is a musical scene more than a definite genre, which develops music using sound chips from ‘retro’ video game consoles and computers. Typically, chiptune musicians use either modified original hardware reengineered to produce music, in which case they produce original compositions, or develop music using samples or real instruments, producing covers of well-known chip pieces or original compositions that imitate the patterns and constraints of such music.

¹⁶ Ian Christie, *Sound of the Beast* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 67.

¹⁷ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of American Mind* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1987), 80.

¹⁸ Robert L. Gross, ‘Heavy Metal Music: A New Subculture in American Society’, *Journal of Popular Culture* 24, No. 1 (Summer, 1990): 129.

¹⁹ For example, lawsuits like *Wilson vs. Midway Games*, *James vs. Meow Media*, *Strickland vs. Sony* and *James Vance vs. Judas Priest* and the work of Craig A. Anderson and Eugene F. Provenzo (see below).

²⁰ Amy Binder, ‘Constructing Racial Rhetoric: Media Depictions of Harm in Heavy Metal and Rap Music’, *American Sociological Review* 58, No. 6 (1993): 754-756.

²¹ See Linda Martin and Kerry Seagrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock and Roll* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 299.

²² US Senate. 1985. Record Labelling. Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, United States Senate. First Session on Contents of Music and the Lyrics of Records, 19 September. S.hrg. 99-259. US Government Printing Office, Washington:

<http://www.joesapt.net/superlink/shrg99-529/index.html>.

²³ Binder, ‘Constructing Racial Rhetoric’.

²⁴ <http://www.walmart.com/cp/Music-Content-Policy/547092>.

²⁵ FTC Releases Report on the Marketing of Violent Entertainment to Children. The hearing about Videogames Violence started on the 9th of December 1993. Senators Joseph Liberman, Hebert Khol and Byron Dorgan lead the group.

²⁶ <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/columns/the-needles/1300-Inappropriate-Content-A-Brief-History-of-Videogame-Ratings-and-the-ESRB>.

²⁷ John Bruce 'Jack' Thompson (born July 25, 1951) is an American activist and disbarred attorney, based in Coral Gables, Florida. Thompson is known for his role as an anti-video-game activist, particularly against violence and sex in video games.

²⁸ Heather Chaplin and Aaron Ruby, *Smartbomb* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2005), 90.

²⁹ See Christopher J. Ferguson and John Kilburn, 'Much Ado about Nothing: The Misestimation and Overinterpretation of Violent Video Game Effects in Eastern and Western Nations: Comment on Anderson et al. (2010)', *Psychological Bulletin*, 2010, <http://www.tamui.edu/~cferguson/Much%20Ado.pdf> and Christopher J. Ferguson 'The School Shooting/Violent Video Game Link: Causal Link or Moral Panic?', *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling* 5, No. ½ (2008): 25-37.

³⁰ Craig A. Anderson and Karen E. Dill, 'Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior in the Laboratory and in Life', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, No. 4 (2000): 772-790; Craig A. Anderson et al., 'Exposure to Violent Media: The Effects of Songs with Violent Lyrics on Aggressive Thoughts and Feelings', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84 (2003): 960-971; Craig A. Anderson et al., *Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents: Theory, Research, and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Craig A. Anderson et al., 'Video Game Effects - Confirmed, Suspected, and Speculative: A Review of the Evidence', *Simulation & Gaming* 40, No. 3 (June, 2009): 377-403; Craig A. Anderson, 'Violent Video Games and Other Media Violence, Part I & II', *Paediatrics for Parents* 26 (2010): 1-4.

³¹ See 'The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children: Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. United State Senate, 106 Congress, 2nd Session. March 21, 2000', <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-106shrg78656/pdf/CHRG-106shrg78656.pdf>.

³² For a recent overview of these claims in their historical context, see Andy R. Brown, 'Suicide Solutions?: Or, How the Emo Class of 2008 Were Able to Contest Their Media Demonization, Whereas the Headbanger Burnouts or "Children of ZoSo" Generation Were Not', *Popular Music History* 6.1, 6.2 (2011): 19-37.

³³ Excerpt from '20/20' on the 'Debate Whether Violent Video Games Desensitize Children', *World News Now*, ABC, 23rd March 2000.

³⁴ For an extended report on lawsuits against videogames see: ‘Trials and Tribulation: Videogames Many Visit to Court’, lup.com, December 14th 2005, <http://www.lup.com/features/trials-and-tribulations?pager.offset=0>.

³⁵ Dominic Arsenault, ‘The Video Game as an Object of Controversy’, in *The Video Game Explosion: A History from Pong to Playstation® and Beyond* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 277-281.

³⁶ Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 272-275.

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