

Hate Games

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Content warnings: This case study contains mentions of racially and religiously motivated violence, including antisemitism and islamophobia. Some quotations may be offensive to readers. These appear only in quotations and not in the author's own words. No depictions of Manifestations or of God are shown, even when they may be pertinent, but depictions are mentioned and described in some instances.

As the author is a Bahá'í, any mentions of God, or His Manifestations, including Their pronouns and adjectives referring to Them, will be capitalized in this case study except for when quoting others, in accordance with the guidance of the Guardian Shoghi Effendi (Hornby, 1988).

Serious games are games which have a primary purpose other than entertainment (Djaouti et al., 2011). To give some examples, edugames like *Mario Teaches Typing* (Interplay Productions, 1992) serve to educate and exergames like *Wii Fit* (Nintendo EAD, 2011) serve to help the player to exercise. This case study examines two examples of hate games – games which serve as hate speech: *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (Inspired Media Entertainment, 2006), or *Eternal Forces* for short, and *Muslim Massacre* (Vaughn, 2008).

Dictionary definitions of hate speech do exist such as that of Cambridge, which states that hate speech is “public speech that expresses hate or encourages violence toward a person or group based on something such as race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation” (2021), and pieces of legislation such as the *Public Order Act 1986* have used definitions like this one. However, as each country legislates in a different way no two have the same definition, and the sticking point tends to be the phrase “encourages violence”.

In *Public Opinion* (1922), Walter Lippmann argues that “The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined.” As such, individuals have “pictures in their heads”.

“Those pictures which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters.”

This case study works upon a definition of hate speech that encompasses not only speech that directly encourages violence toward a person or group based on innate attributes of that group, but also to speech that adds to Public Opinions which consistently result in violence toward a person or group based on their innate attributes.

Muslim Massacre is an independent video game which was released in 2008 by Eric Vaughn, whose surname is sometimes spelled Vaugh or Vaughan, and who sometimes uses the online handle “Sigvatr”. It is a top-down shooter in the vein of games like *Robotron: 2084* (Vid Kidz, 1982), with the player’s aim being to “take control of the American hero and wipe out the Muslim race with an arsenal of the world’s most destructive weapons” (Los Angeles Times, 2008).



Figure 1 – A screenshot of Muslim Massacre.

After receiving backlash to the game, Vaughn took the site hosting it down and published the following:

"I would like to make a public apology for any offense that I might have caused through releasing this game, and to Muslims in particular. My intentions when releasing this project were to mock the foreign policy of the United States and the commonly held belief in the United States that Muslims are a hostile people to be held with suspicion. I would like to make it clear that I have never shared such a belief and my intention was to mock those who actually do believe these things." (Greene, 2008)

However, Danny Ledonne, creator of *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* (2005), a game where the player plays as the perpetrators of the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, then published an e-mail conversation he had had with Vaughn, which took place shortly after the apology went out:

*"**Danny Ledonne:** It is too bad that you pulled your game simply because some people didn't understand your political message (I for one gleaned a satirical criticism of Bush's foreign policy from "Muslim Massacre" whether you had intended it or not)... I believe by complying with demands of censorship toward the Danish cartoon depicting the prophet Muhammad and games like "Muslim Massacre," we are enabling a culture of taboos that are ultimately unproductive in cross-cultural dialogue...*

Eric Vaughn:** The apology was actually fake. I put the site back up shortly after. Now the media is in a total bind and doesn't know what to believe. I was just fing [sic] with everyone the entire time and have had great success.*

***Danny Ledonne:** Erg. I get it. But I don't. I mean, you have an actual message (I presume?) and I think you could legitimately stand behind it...*

***Eric Vaughn:** Not exactly, basically my message was the Muslims need to suck it*

down and stop getting offended by everything. If they learnt to just ignore people, things would be better.” (GamePolitics.com, 2008)

Even though Vaughn admits here that his “apology was actually fake”, his stated intention is not to encourage violence towards Muslims, rather: “Muslims need to suck it down and stop getting offended by everything”. Mohammed Shafiq, chief executive of British Muslim youth organization The Ramadhan Foundation, said of the game that “encouraging children and young people in a game to kill Muslims is unacceptable, tasteless and deeply offensive” (Ahmed, 2008). Vaughn responded:

“To Mr. Mohammed Shafiq I would like to say that if a kid spends six hours a day on violent games, I think that they aren’t likely to go outside at all, so he should not be worried.” (Muslim in Suffer, 2008)

To be clear, according to his own statements, Vaughn published *Muslim Massacre* in 2008 knowing that it would be offensive to Muslims and did not intend for it to be a commentary on anything else, only wanting to provoke a reaction. Yet, when that reaction appeared, he treated concerned Muslims as needlessly incredulous and sought to confound the media that reported on the game. This raises two questions which are key to understanding *Muslim Massacre*: how did Vaughn cause such offense, and why did he seek it out?

To answer the “how”, Kotaku writer Michael McWhertor said of the game in 2008:

“We’ve played the game and found it to be a rather straightforward shooter, with a surprisingly well crafted visual style and retro 8-bit musical nods... It doesn’t play particularly well, nor is it a bad game.”

Earlier, *Muslim Massacre* was compared to *Robotron: 2084*, a game that was released in 1982, 24 years before *Muslim Massacre*, and with which *Muslim Massacre* shares most of its mechanics as a top-down shooter. Compare figures 1 and 2, for example. The lo-fi visuals and audio were a common feature in retro games like *Robotron: 2084*, but also had become prevalent in independent games of the 2000s such as *Cave Story* (Studio Pixel, 2004). Considered in the MDA framework (Hunicke et al., 2004), there is nothing unfamiliar about the game’s mechanics and dynamics, so the reason for the outrage was purely to do with the game’s aesthetics.

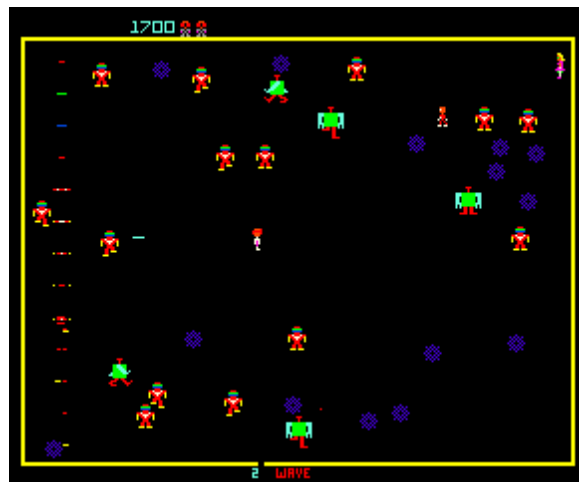


Figure 2 – A screenshot of Robotron: 2084.

While this might seem an obvious point: whereas *Robotron* has the player character fighting robots, *Muslim Massacre* has the player character killing Muslims, and whereas *Cave Story* has whimsical fantasy creatures as its bosses, *Muslim Massacre*'s bosses include depictions of Osama bin Laden, the Prophet Muhammad, and Allah. The shock this creates is intentional, and a tried-and-tested technique. Consider the “Danish cartoons” that Ledonne mentioned in his email conversation with Vaughn; the Jyllands-Posten cartoons of 2005, among them an image showing a depiction of Muhammad “carrying a lit bomb in the shape of a turban”, another showing a depiction of Him “brandishing a sword ready for a fight”, and yet another with a depiction of Him standing in the clouds before a line of suicide-bombers saying, “Stop, stop, we have run out of virgins.” The original publication of the cartoons, according to Asser (2010), was accompanied by an editorial about self-censorship. Danish writer Kåre Bluitgen had been having difficulty finding illustrators for his then-upcoming children’s book *The Koran and the life of the Prophet Muhammad* (2013), as illustrators were unwilling to draw depictions of Muhammad. Asser states:

“Jyllands-Posten asked cartoonists to ‘draw the Prophet as they saw him’, as an assertion of free speech and to reject pressure by Muslims [sic] groups to respect their sensitivities.”



Figure 3 – A Danish flag being burned in response to the Jyllands-Posten cartoons (Asser, 2010).

The question, after this, is “why?” Again, Vaughn knew even before he released *Muslim Massacre* it would be considered offensive, in the same way that Jyllands-Posten knew their cartoons would be. The simple answer is Public Opinion.

“European countries restrict racism and some other types of extreme speech... But, oddly enough, anti-Islam speech has become almost the core of free speech in Europe. Although Western democracies advocate that minorities have to be protected from extreme speech, it is not only far-right groups that set the tone of extreme or hate speech toward Muslims. Anti-Muslim racism, hatred and discrimination toward Muslims in Europe have been increasing among the leftist and centrist circles, which justifies their tendency with the claim of protecting Western

values and defending secularism. In that way, they think that they won't leave their fingerprints and they can hide their Islamophobic bias.” (Oruç, 2020)

Muslim Massacre, like the Jyllands-Posten cartoons, is an exercise in “free speech”. The creators of each believed that their free speech was being suppressed by Muslims, so they published works specifically to offend Muslims, and used their reactions as vindication of their original belief: that Islam is incompatible with liberal democracies.

Consider the ways in which this has manifested in violence. On 22 July 2011 in Norway, Anders Breivik (who has also gone by the names Fjotolf Hansen and Andrew Berwick) committed two terrorist attacks: the first a car bombing and the second a mass shooting, which together claimed 77 lives (BBC News, 2012a). Less than 90 minutes before the attacks began, Breivik sent the manifesto *2083 – A European Declaration of Independence* to 250 British contacts (Taylor, 2011). Its text is hosted at the Internet Archive. The whole document is more than 1500 pages, but among its opening sections is one titled “About the compendium”, which includes the following assertion:

“It is not only our right but also our duty to contribute to preserve our identity, our culture and our national sovereignty by preventing the ongoing Islamisation. There is no Resistance Movement if individuals like us refuse to contribute...”

Multiculturalism (cultural Marxism/political correctness), as you might know, is the root cause of the ongoing Islamisation of Europe which has resulted in the ongoing Islamic colonisation of Europe through demographic warfare (facilitated by our own leaders). This compendium presents the solutions and explains exactly what is required by each and every one of us in the coming decades.”

2083



A European Declaration of Independence

De Laude Novae Militiae
Pauperum commilitones Christi Templique Solomonici

Figure 4 – Front cover of 2083: A European Declaration of Independence.

Breivik outlines what he perceives to be many problems, and proposes many so-called solutions, including the following:

“First of all, ordinary citizens should arm themselves immediately since crime and violence is spreading fast throughout the Western world... We should assume that the mass media and our leaders are not telling us the full truth about the scale and consequences of Muslim immigration...”

An ideological ‘war within the West’ has paved the way for a physical ‘war against the West’ waged by Islamic Jihadists, who correctly view our acceptance of Muslim immigration as a sign of weakness...

People of European origins need to adjust our self-image correspondingly and ditch the current ideology of deranged altruism.”

Anders Breivik was found to be sane (BBC News, 2012b). Breivik’s view of Muslims and of Islam is not one founded upon any kind of factual basis but is also not founded upon insanity. Rather, it is derived from the Public Opinion which also created *Muslim Massacre* and the Jyllands-Posten cartoons and to which both contributed in their own ways.

Another example of the weaponization of Public Opinion is *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, a real-time strategy game, nominally in the same category as games like *Command & Conquer* (Westwood Studios, 1995), part of the multimedia *Left Behind* franchise of Christian apocalyptic fiction which began with the novel *Left Behind* written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins and published in 1995. The franchise follows various members of the Tribulation Force, a group of born-again Christians, and their lives during the events following the Rapture, which is an interpretation of a Thessalonians prophecy:

“15 According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” (Thessalonians 4:15-17)



Figure 5 – A screenshot of Left Behind: Eternal Forces.

LaHaye and his co-author Jenkins are of the belief that the events described in Thessalonians are to be interpreted literally, and that they will be followed by the events prophesied in the Book of Revelation, which again are interpreted mostly literally. The Thessalonians prophecy is called the Rapture, and the time thereafter until the Kingdom of Christ is established on Earth, the Tribulation. This ordering of the events of the Biblical apocalypse in which the Rapture precedes the Tribulation, and the Tribulation precedes the Kingdom of Christ, is called pretribulation, premillennial dispensationalism.



Figure 6 – A screenshot of Command & Conquer.

The premise of *Eternal Forces* is certainly strikingly different from the likes of *Command & Conquer*, and this is reflected in its gameplay too. Brett Todd explains in a review of the game:

"... your goal is not to wipe out the enemy as in a typical RTS game but to convert as many neutrals and baddies as possible by raising their spirit level. You seek out these people and directly target the ones you want to save with the recruit ability..."

... units steadily lose spirit unless they're bolstered with regular prayer." (2006)

However, despite praising this uniqueness, Todd also calls *Eternal Forces* a "bad game", and even ridicules the beliefs of its creators and target audience as absurd:

"The real-time strategy/adventure game from Left Behind Games based on the best-selling series of novels from Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins will even let down born-again types who expect the Rapture to beam them up to heaven any day now..."

Jerry B. Jenkins has said of the reasons why he and LaHaye first wrote *Left Behind*: "Our hope is that some people will be persuaded" (Dreyfuss, 2004). At its core, belief in pretribulation, premillennial dispensationalism presents a kind of *Pascal's Wager* (Pascal, 1958). Whereas Pascal presents the possibility that a person may be damned to an eternity in Hell if they do not dedicate their life to God, and that the chance of infinite reward in Heaven at the cost of some finite inconvenience in life is worthwhile, what LaHaye and Jenkins present is the possibility of having to face a terrible, violent tribulation, described in graphic detail from beginning to end. Todd's ridicule of *Eternal Forces* mirrors Dawkins' mockery of Pascal (2006) in that despite his wager, Pascal never gave compelling proof for the existence of God, and likewise despite their own alternative wager, LaHaye and his co-authors never give proof that the apocalypse could even come about that would convince a non-believer. If this is the case, and the *Left Behind* franchise offers no reason to convert to one who did not already intend to do so, then what is its purpose?

In another book, this time co-authored with David Noebel, LaHaye describes what he believes to be a growing atheistic religion which he refers to as Secular Humanism:

"Most of us do not realize what Secular Humanism really is and how it is destroying our culture, families, and country – and one day will destroy the entire world.

It is no overstatement to declare that most of today's evils can be traced to Secular Humanism, which already has taken over our government, the United Nations, education, television, and most of the other power centers of life... [Secular Humanism] is driven by a flaming hatred for Jesus Christ that seeks to eradicate the Christian worldview from the media, the government, and especially public education...

... The awful truth is that the last major obstacle for the humanists to conquer is the church of Jesus Christ... and they intend to remedy that...

... Therefore, unless the 80 million evangelical Christians in our nation wake up to whom the enemy really is, humanists will soon accomplish their goal of world domination." (2000)



Figure 7 – The Happy Human, an icon of secular humanism created by Dennis Barrington.

The “Secular Humanism” which LaHaye and Noebel describe is non-existent and far removed from the very real version of Humanism that exists in various nations (American Humanist Association, 2003), but now consider the tenants of the Global Community Faith, the belief system created by the antagonists of the *Left Behind* franchise:

“Our religions themselves have caused as much division and bloodshed around the world as any government, army, or weapon. From this day forward we will unite under the banner of the Global Community Faith... Whether we believe God is a real person or merely a concept, God is in all and above all and around all. God is in us. God is us. We are God...”

We believe two things concretely. First, in the basic goodness of humankind. Second, that the disappearances were a religious cleansing. Some religions saw many disappear. Others saw very few. Many saw none. But the fact that many were left from each proves that none was better than the other. We will be tolerant of all, believing that the best of us remain.” (LaHaye & Jenkins, 1996)

The Global Community Faith is likewise removed from any extant faith but is clearly a version of LaHaye’s manufactured “Secular Humanism” appearing in his fiction.

What the works of LaHaye and his co-authors, and their subsequent adaptations, really accomplish is “[mobilizing] the language of religious persecution to shut down political debate and critique by characterizing any position not in alignment with [their] politicized version of Christianity as an example of antireligious bigotry and persecution.” (Castelli, 2007) This is called the Christian Persecution Complex: the belief among some Christians that Christianity is being persecuted in places of the world where it is, in fact, dominant. In their work Noebel and LaHaye make repeated mention of “80 million evangelical Christians”, who share the Christian Persecution Complex. In 2017, white Evangelicals in the USA said they believed they faced more discrimination than Muslims (Green, 2017). Of course, Christians do face oppression in many countries around the world, but the USA is not one of them (Open Doors, 2021).

Evangelicalism, as it is known, is a broad religious movement within Christianity, and an Evangelical is someone who, according to Evangelical organization Operation World, “emphasizes and adheres” to the following:

“The Lord Jesus Christ as the sole source of salvation through faith in Him, as validated by His crucifixion and resurrection.

Personal faith and conversion with regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

Recognition of the inspired Word of God as the ultimate basis and authority for faith and Christian living.

Commitment to biblical witness, evangelism and mission that brings others to faith in Christ.” (2021a)

Operation World also estimates, at time of writing, the population of Evangelicals in the United States of America to be 91,764,554 (2021b). Not every Evangelical is a pretribulation, premillennial dispensationalist, but the movement of Evangelicalism in the USA is very politically unified. In the 2016 and 2020 Presidential Elections, Donald J. Trump received, respectively, 80% (CNN, 2016) and 76% (CNN, 2020) of votes of white Evangelicals.

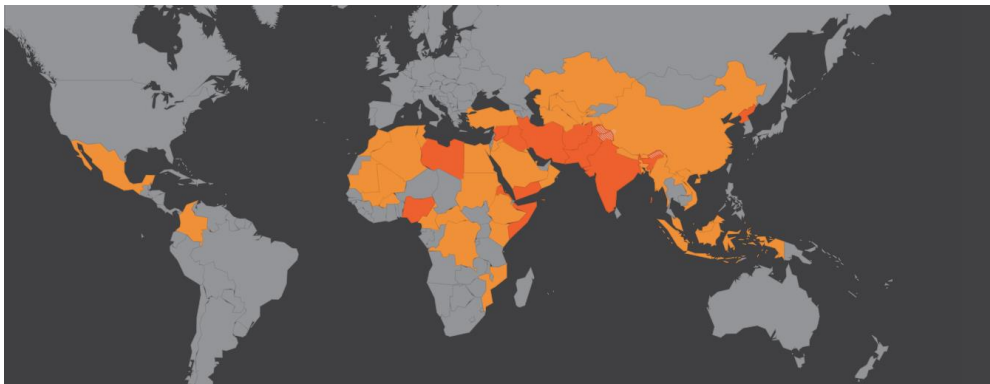


Figure 8 – Open Doors’ World Watch List map in 2021. Red indicates extreme oppression of Christians; orange indicates very high.

While the entire *Left Behind* franchise perpetuates the Christian Persecution Complex, each does so in subtly different ways. Consider *Eternal Forces* as a system of conflict (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). During the campaign of *Eternal Forces*, the player, controlling the Tribulation Force, is pitted against the computer, controlling the Global Community. As Todd mentioned in his review, the Tribulation Force avoids conflict wherever possible, converting rather than killing unlike in *Command & Conquer* where the player’s only recourse is to destroy. The Global Community, on the other hand, “don’t have to worry about [their spirit level] dropping too low” and can thus kill the player’s characters indiscriminately (Butts, 2006).

In *Command & Conquer*, regardless of the narrative and differences in units and buildings that factions had available to them, in any given game they would usually be matched in power. While one may be more morally justified in their actions than the other in terms of the narrative, both had the same abilities at their disposal. In *Eternal Forces*, the odds are always stacked against the Tribulation Force and in favor of the Global Community, as the former act peacefully and lovingly while the latter act violently and suppressively.

With the Global Community Faith mirroring what LaHaye and Noebel call “Secular Humanism”, and “Secular Humanism” encompassing most of the non-Christian world according to them, the antagonist in the Public Opinion of the Christian Persecution Complex is made to seem overwhelmingly powerful and overwhelmingly cruel, and so any action taken against it becomes justified, and indeed any non-Christian becomes a suitable target.

One example where the Christian Persecution Complex manifests itself is in QAnon, where the paranoia expressed by individuals like LaHaye and his co-authors is crystalized into a nationwide movement.

“QAnon is the umbrella term for a sprawling spiderweb of right-wing internet conspiracy theories with antisemitic and anti-LGBTQ elements that falsely claim the world is run by a secret cabal of pedophiles who worship Satan and are plotting against President Trump...”

... QAnon believers falsely claim the cabal is abducting children to kill them and harvest their blood for a chemical known as adrenochrome, which is used to extend their lives...

*... QAnon followers believe the storm [usually with a capital S, Storm] is a coming series of mass arrests – a judgment day – that will destroy the deep state”
(Hatewatch Staff, 2020).*



Figure 9 – A QAnon supporter at a pro-Trump rally (Hatewatch Staff, 2020).

Much like Breivik took the Public Opinion that Islam sought to repress free speech and was a danger to the west and acted in what he believed was self-defense, QAnon takes the Christian Persecution Complex and extrapolates. Now, not only is the enemy “Secular Humanism”, but it is a Satan-worshipping cult of pedophiles, so cartoonishly evil that no one could refuse to oppose them. Of course, not every “Evangelical”, as LaHaye and his co-authors call them, is a believer in QAnon. However, QAnon could not exist if not for the Public Opinion which LaHaye and his co-authors helped to create. Ed Stetzer explains:

“In Christianity, we believe God is at work, and if something happens we don't understand, God had a different plan, and we look to him for guidance. QAnon is following similar patterns — knowing the Q [the originator of QAnon] always has a plan in this cosmic struggle of good against evil.

Religious language appeals to religious people, but QAnon is not for Christians — it is a replacement, with its own messiah and demons, unrelated to Christianity and unmoored from the Bible.” (2020)

And Sharon Neff, wife of a retired Baptist pastor said:

“What resonated with me is the idea of moving toward a global government... and that actually goes along with the Christian belief about the End Times.’...

... Neff also said she likes that Q quotes Christian scripture extensively and claims to be exposing child trafficking, a problem that she said she and other Southern Baptist women have been fighting for years.” (Burke, 2020)

QAnon supporters have been involved in incidents of trespassing (Hernandez, 2018), harassment (Sommer, 2018), kidnapping (Sommer, 2020), and murder (Reinstein, 2019). Many supporters were also among those who stormed the USA’s Capitol building in 2021 – a culmination of their rhetoric and what they perceived as their persecution, alleging that the cabal opposing them had rigged the 2020 United States Presidential Election (Neilson & McFall-Johnsen, 2021). These are baseless claims, but so are those made by LaHaye and Noebel about “Secular Humanism”. All are influenced by and contribute to the Public Opinion of Christian Persecution among Evangelicals.



Figure 10 – The “QAnon Shaman” inside the Capitol building (Neilson & McFall-Johnsen, 2021).

The likes of *Muslim Massacre* and *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* are just two examples of hate games; however, they serve as useful demonstrations of how hate games are formed from and can influence Public Opinion using their medium. In addition, they show the inadequacy of current systems to regulate them. The Entertainment Software Rating Board gave *Eternal Forces* a “Teen” rating, declaring it suitable

for those 13 years old and above (2021). As *Muslim Massacre* was distributed through Vaughn's own website and not in brick-and-mortar stores, he never had to even obtain a rating from the ESRB, however what the game's age rating would have been likely mattered little to those that played it.

There is not a simple way to remedy this problem. The digital age means that anyone can, given the right tools and time, make a game (Cobbett, 2017), and if a person can make a game, they can also make a hate game. To have each one be checked over thoroughly for objectionable content before it could be released into the world would be as impractical as checking every word that was thought before it could be spoken. However, this is not strictly necessary.

Consider countries that have laws prohibiting hate speech. Of course, not every word that a person says can be checked, but when a person does speak hatefully, if they are heard by those willing to report it, they can still be brought to account. The same is true of hate speech in media, including hate games. With robust enough legislation, a willing enough populace, and careful enough enforcement, hate games may be reported by players and their original distributor made to cease, with punishments placed upon their continued distribution and upon duplication by third parties, mitigating the harm done and breaking the cycle of Public Opinion.

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