

Video game watchdog shuts down, victim of economy

18 December 2009, By JEFF BAENEN , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- David Walsh said when he was assembling his first report card on video game violence 13 years ago, children were attacking on-screen monsters or aliens with imaginary chain saws and guns.

"When I saw kids as young as 8, 9 years old literally doing facial contortions as they killed and dismembered people, it was pretty shocking. And I think what happened is a lot of other people got shocked as well," Walsh recalls. "I don't think we want our kids' culture defined by killing, mayhem and dismemberment as entertainment."

That first report card, which singled out bloody first-person shooter games "Doom" and "Duke Nukem," made an instant splash on Capitol Hill in 1996 and made the annual reports issued each holiday season by Walsh's National Institute on Media and the Family a news fixture.

But there was no video game report card this year, and there won't be any more. The institute is closing its doors, a victim of the poor economy. Walsh, the group's founder and president, is packing his books as his staff of eight full-time employees prepares to shut down Dec. 23.

"Fundraising has been more and more difficult," Walsh said. "It really wasn't that we put ourselves out of business, because the technology is changing so quickly, the issues just won't quit."

It's a bittersweet end for the organization Walsh started in 1996. He takes pride in how "a little nonprofit in Minneapolis" was able to influence an industry that, according to the Entertainment Software Association, topped \$22 billion in U.S. computer and [video game hardware](#), software and peripheral sales in 2008.

"Ten years ago, a kid 10 years old could walk into any store in America and buy an ultra-violent, adult-rated game. That's no longer true," Walsh told The

Associated Press in his office, where empty boxes await his books.

While some people have posted on gaming Web sites celebrating the institute's demise, others have praised its role in helping get retailers to post game ratings and ask for an identification when selling mature-rated games.

"Were it not for those collaborative efforts by all sides, it's questionable whether there would have been a non-legislative resolution," Hal Halpin, president of the gamers group the Entertainment Consumers Association, told the AP.

When he issued his first report card, Walsh said, there were two rating systems for video games battling it out and "when a game would be rated was a hit-or-miss deal." Since then, an industry group established in 1994, the Entertainment Software Rating Board, or ESRB, has become the standard in rating computer and video games.

Walsh said he got many tips about video games from industry insiders. His organization hired students to play video games and sent boys and girls to see if retailers would sell them M-rated games without asking for an ID.

It was Walsh's group that announced in 2005 that the best-selling [video game](#) "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" contained graphic sexual images that could be unlocked using an Internet download. That led major retailers to pull the game from their shelves. The ESRB eventually revoked the game's M (mature) rating and tagged it AO (adults only).

Walsh said his group got a computer game developer to reverse-engineer the game and prove that the sex scenes were built into the disk, not a modification created by a hacker on the Internet as the parent company of the game's producer had suggested.

Last summer, the institute learned that founding sponsor Fairview Health Services was pulling out. After looking at going independent, the institute's board decided to shut down at the end of the year. Walsh said the organization is talking to three nonprofits about taking on its work.

On average, the institute's budget was \$1.8 million a year, according to Walsh.

With white hair, rimless glasses and black sport jacket, Walsh, 64, resembles a high school teacher, which he was. The father of three grown children takes a low-key approach and says he's never endorsed censorship.

The New Jersey native has written books about the impact of consumerism and media on kids (his 10th book comes out next year) and says the institute was a way to help parents make informed choices for their children. Others were monitoring television, but less focus was on video games.

Author Steven L. Kent of Seattle, who wrote "The Ultimate History of Video Games," appeared at the annual releases of the Walsh reports. Kent said the institute's voice will be missed.

"I think the game industry will look back and pine for the days when their top opposing voice had as much self-restraint as Dr. Walsh had," Kent said.

On the Net: National Institute on Media and the Family: <http://www.mediafamily.org>

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APA citation: Video game watchdog shuts down, victim of economy (2009, December 18) retrieved 22 May 2019 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-12-video-game-watchdog-victim-economy.html>

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