

Walmart, ESPN pull violent game marketing following shootings

Enlarge / ESPN feels its audiences don't want to see *Apex Legends* scenes like this "given the swirl of that moment."

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Some of the biggest corporations in the United States are scaling back their display of violent games in the wake of recent mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton.

As reported by Vice, employees at Walmart stores are reporting receipt of a notice to "remove signing and displays referencing violence." These directions include turning off "any video game display consoles that show a demo of violent games" and "remov[ing] any [signs] referencing combat or third-person shooter video games." Employees are also instructed to "cancel any events promoting combat style or third-person shooter games that may be scheduled in Electronics."

The memo also says "movies displaying violence" and "hunting season videos" should not be displayed in stores for the time being.

At ESPN, the taped broadcast of an *Apex Legends* tournament planned for this weekend has been postponed. The delay, first reported by esports journalist Rod Breslau and later confirmed

to Ars Technica, was “made out of respect for the victims and all those impacted in the immediate aftermath of the shootings,” according to a source with direct knowledge of the decision. “It seemed the prudent thing to do given the swirl of that moment,” the source added.

The tournament, which took place last weekend, will still be recapped on the ESPN3 online streaming service this weekend, though plans for coverage across ABC, ESPN2, and ESPNEWS have been postponed.

Bad timing?

Decisions surrounding the display of video game violence have taken on some added weight as multiple prominent politicians discuss exposure to games as a potential cause of real world violence. But there’s some evidence that these corporations are making changes out of perceived sensitivity to viewers rather than sensitivity to political pressure.

At Walmart, for instance, there has been no indication that stores will halt the sale of violent games, or even pull their boxes down from shelves. Walmart has also resisted calls to limit sales of actual guns in its stores, telling USA Today that “there’s been no change in policy.”

The retailer has long taken part in the ESRB’s voluntary Retail Council program, which as a whole attains 80 to 90 percent effectiveness in preventing sales of M and AO-rated games to minors. Walmart has not responded to a request for comment from Ars Technica.

Similarly, ABC and ESPN haven’t announced any changes in their overall policy toward broadcasting violent games as part of their esports coverage. Instead, the “swirl of the moment” seems to be leading to a temporary change in the way the network perceives its audience’s sensitivities. Given the sheer frequency of mass shootings in recent years, though,

there's no guarantee that the postponed October airdate will be any further removed from a similar "swirl" of sensitive news coverage.

The game industry writ large isn't immune to these kinds of considerations following reports of real-world violence. In 2016, the Entertainment Software Association told Ars Technica that participants in the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo were taking steps "to be sensitive to the national mood at the moment" in the wake of the Pulse Night Club shooting in Orlando, Florida. Subsequent E3 conventions seem to have reverted back to form, though, prominently featuring plenty of violent content as usual. Many games makers were also forced to change content, marketing, or release schedules following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Though studies have shown that exposure to virtual violence doesn't lead to real world violence, pushing that kind of content to your audience takes on a different tone in the wake of a prominent national tragedy. Not to worry, though; our collective memory and sensitivities always seems to revert back to the media violence status quo before too long.

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