

Warning:

This is a case study of a controversial game and necessarily contains potentially offensive descriptions, images, and quotations. As stated on the Running with Scissors website, this "contains content not approved for consumption by children, senators, religious leaders and/or other easily damaged psyches, those seeking to enhance or establish political careers and/or possessed of delusions of grandeur. If accidentally exposed, flush eyes with cold water and induce vomiting. If irritation persists, sit quietly and watch PBS" ([Running with Scissors](#)).

Postal 2, sequel to "one of gaming's most controversial games ever," is due for delayed release by developer Running with Scissors and publisher Whiptail Interactive in late March ([Von Kallenbach](#)). Like its 1997 predecessor Postal, Postal 2 is already being condemned for promoting discrimination and violence. As the title suggests, the first-person shooter is a "twisted celebration of the...incredible string of mass murders performed by gun-crazy U.S. Postal Service workers over the past decade," allowing the main character, "Postal Dude," to vent his frustrations with life on bystanders of various sexualities, races, occupations, and genders in extremely violent ways ([Tabloid News Service](#)). Criticism of this unpolitically-correct content and the negative portrayal of the U.S. Postal Service resulted in the first Postal being pulled from major retail shelves after only three weeks, banned in over ten countries, and included on Senator Lieberman of Connecticut's 1997 list of the three worst things in America (along with Marilyn Manson and Calvin Klein underwear ads). Despite these obstacles, Postal has become a cult classic amongst PC gamers and sold somewhere around a quarter-million copies worldwide, grossing \$5M on a \$1M investment, according to Running with Scissors CEO Vince Desi ([Nintzel](#)). With this fan base, media coverage due to its controversial content, and improved AI and 3d technology, Postal 2 promises to be even more successful than the first Postal.

The popularity of Postal and Postal 2 illustrates the demand for shocking violence and appeal of over-the-top controversial subject matter in video games. This case study explores the roots of that demand and Running with Scissors' controversial role in meeting it with the games Postal and Postal 2. First, the history of Running with Scissors and its key players is described. The controversies, both criticisms and Running with Scissors' response, surrounding the Postal games are explored. Second, Postal 2 is compared to Postal. The technology and game-play of the first Postal game is not discussed in detail since its technology is now out of date and the main issue is its controversial reception and how Postal 2 will surpass even Postal's outrageous violence. The technology behind Postal 2 is discussed in more detail, as its cutting-edge nature contributes to enhanced graphics for portraying realistic violence. In addition, game-play of Postal 2 is described to substantiate the claim that this game breaks social as well as technological boundaries. Finally, conclusions about the appeal and future of extremely violent video games are drawn from this case study.

Vince Desi, Running with Scissors (RWS) CEO and Mike Riedel, RWS president, met at Atari in the early 1980s. There, Desi worked as a scout and Riedel was one of his recruits, a dropout from Rochester Institute of Technology. Desi and Riedel left Atari when it started to have financial problems and formed their own company, Riedel Software Products (RSP). Desi, who didn't even play video games, was the businessman and Riedel oversaw programming, artwork, and game design. RSP had a reputation for "being technically innovative...dedicated to getting it right" and had steady-work designing children's games such for Sesame Street, Hanna-Barbera, Walt Disney, and Warner Bros, amongst others. By the early 1990s, however, the team was ready to move on. RSP relocated to Tucson and continued to develop children's games for licensed properties but according to Desi, the work was getting boring. "By 1997, everybody was sick of kid's games," Desi says. "The idea was to go out and make the most outrageous video game we could and a game we would like to play ourselves. Everybody was bored with a lot of the games that were out there, zombies and the rest of the crap. So the idea was, let's make a game about a guy who basically goes postal and have it be really fun and

fast, action-paced" (Nintzel). So Desi and Reidel formed a new company, Running with Scissors, to make Postal.

Even before its release in 1997, Postal and its creators at RWS were criticized by the U.S. Postal Service for its portrayal of postal service workers. In a letter now framed and hanging on Desi's office wall, former Postmaster General Marvin Runyon stated, "The stereotype of the violent postal employee, perpetuated by software such as yours, does a grave disservice to the more than 750,000 men and women who work hard every day to deliver excellence to their fellow citizens...All of us at the Postal Service have a sense of humor, but there is nothing funny about your game 'Postal...It is in very poor taste, and is an erroneous and unfair portrayal of the nation's postal employees...I believe you owe the men and women of the Postal Service an apology, and hope you will have enough common sense to discontinue the 'Postal Game.'" The Postal Service went on to file a suit to block RWS from acquiring a copyright to the videogame name "Postal." This lawsuit contributed to delayed production of a Postal sequel and five years later they are still in litigation. Desi suggests that this suit is really about trying to stop Postal production, saying, "At one point, they had a counterclaim where they said the post office might go into video games...That's how absurd it got" (Nintzel). The Postal Service was just the first of many critics of the graphically violent game which has been called everything from "irredeemably violent" to "anti-social, psychotic and completely irresistible." Senator Lieberman ranked the game as the number one problem in America and sought to ban it altogether, saying, "...there remains a small but significant element within the industry that insists on churning out ever-more graphic, gruesome and grotesque products. Let there be no doubt: These games are not harmless fun, as some suggest, but digital poison" (Schliesman). Desi attributes both this criticism and the game's appeal amongst fans to the fact that the game was cutting edge in pushing social boundaries. "Postal went beyond what anybody else ever did," Desi says. "It was the first game that allowed you to commit suicide, first game that allowed you to take on the persona of a crazy person in a real world rather than being some kind of soldier fighting off zombies from some faraway planet." Despite criticism and censorship, many players apparently agree with Desi because Postal went on to become a financial success and cult classic.

The Running with Scissors team counters criticisms to Postal by defending the game as adult entertainment that satirizes today's politically correct culture. "We've always made a major effort to distinguish the property as a game for a mature audience...We're not saying this is for kids," states Desi (Nintzel). Although Postal is indeed rated M for Mature audiences, Jaret Schachter, RWS marketing director, facetiously describes their feelings for this rating as "screw you for judging me...I am who I am." In any event, the team started RWS because they were bored with the content of children's games and Postal is intended to be a game for adults. However, even Desi admits that since the videogame industry has evolved into an entertainment medium mostly for children, that is a tough message to convey to kids. "Parents need to take responsibility," he says. "Guess what? You should really know what's going on in your kids' bedroom" (Byra). RWS thus believes that it is the responsibility of parents to monitor their child and prevent them from playing games such as Postal which are designed for adult players.

Postal is shocking even to the adults it was designed for and that is precisely the point of the game. It takes violence to an absurd level that comically satirizes life's daily frustrations and political correctness. "You have to understand, the violence in 'Postal 2' is so over the top, it is so absurd, so ridiculous, that anyone who takes it seriously belongs in an institution," Desi says. Postal is designed for critical adults who can distinguish between real and make-believe. The RWS website responds to attempts to censor sales of Postal with this statement:

Contrary to the "fear-enema" that some politicians and religious organizations would like to spray up the collective ass of the entire planet, we believe that the vast majority of people are, in fact, NOT inbred zombie murder-bots just waiting for some entertainment product to finish their "programming". We also do not believe that ANY creative industry should ever have to castrate itself under politically-motivated censorship guidelines designed around the imagined

needs of six year-olds or clinically psychotic persons (unless that is their intended target audience, of course). ([Running with Scissors](#)).

Additionally, Desi states that "RWS thinks violence belongs in video games not on the streets" ([Goldman](#)). The game provides a safe (for the player and others) environment to vent. The player can take his angst out on anyone and in any way, relieving tension with *simulated* extreme violence. "While our game may be considered politically incorrect, mean spirited and infused with dark humor, that does not mean that we enjoy REAL death in ANY form. Real death is for morticians, psychopaths and religious zealots...Have a clue folks. And if this statement causes any lunatics out there to "lose respect" for us, then fuck you" ([Running with Scissors](#)). Postal contains graphic portrayals of extreme violence that are humorous to adult fans because they violate social boundaries of acceptability. This particular type of "adult black humor," achieved through a mixture of simulated violence and vulgarity, is intended to *replace not encourage* real aggression.

Running with Scissors hopes that that Postal 2 will continue the Postal legacy by pushing social and technological boundaries even farther. It accomplishes the latter by adding more sophisticated 3D animation, increased character variety, and an interactive adventure element to the traditional shooter. Epic Games' Unreal Warfare engine, MathEngine's Karma physics, and Running with Scissors' Liquid software were used to make Postal 2 more realistic and with better game-play than the first ([Saltzman](#)). According to a distributor, EB Games, this combined technology allows the player to "freely explore full 3-D open ended environments. Interact with over 100 unique NPC's including Gary Coleman, marching bands, dogs, cats and elephants, protesters, policemen and civilians, with or without weapons. POSTAL 2 is all about choice" ([EB Games Online, Inc.](#)). Every character model will be made up of 3,000 polygons and by swapping skins, animation, skeletons, and dialogue, there are over one hundred unique people for Postal Dude to interact with in the game. Every character has hit-specific reactions, and to further add to the realism, their dead bodies never disappear. Karma physics makes movement that is "life-like, efficient and stable" according to Mike Gamble, Business Development Director for MathEngine. Desi elaborates, "Dead is dead, but DYING is a religious experience thanks to Karma! And when a 55-gallon gasoline drum is rolling towards you, it doesn't just roll; it bounces and skips down the hill just like in real life" ([Hollund](#)). Additionally the complex AI allows each character to recognize and respond appropriate to the kind of weapons you carry and what you are doing with it. "Splash some



Screen shot from Postal 2:  
Burning a Bystander

gasoline on someone, and he or she will run off screaming before you have a chance to strike your match (the person will remain flammable, however). Cops, on the other hand, can tell the difference between legal and illegal weapons you're carrying. A pistol that isn't being pointed at anyone, for example, won't illicit much of a response from nearby policemen, but if they see you with a rocket launcher--no matter how innocently you might be carrying it--they'll take you down." Desi says that interacting with a wide people of as they go about their daily lives and having them respond appropriately makes the game more realistic and the violence all that much more effective.

"And they behave so realistically that it's almost scary!" adds Desi ([Ajami](#)).

This technology creates a more realistic game which, combined with Postal Dude's new weapons and violent options, creates the shocking effect that RWS aims for. The new version is a first-person shooter-adventure, a more interactive version of the original third-person shooter. "In the original one, you just went around blasting...In Postal 2, there's much more of an adventure element. In addition to the action shoot-'em-up, we have an adventure element, where you can go around and explore and find things. You can play the whole game and never kill anybody. But...that'll never happen" ([Schliesman](#)). Indeed, its hard to imagine that someone who would buy the infamous \$49.99 game won't partake in the ridiculous



to

carnage. (Price quote from [EB Games Online, Inc.](#)) Amongst Postal Dude's new activities are setting fire to a marching band and an elephant, opening fire on a gay pride parade, minority parade, or police parade, sucking on a "health pipe" to increase health levels, and using a cat as a silencer for your machine gun, which "lets out a yowl and a blood spurt when you fire single shots, while a sustained blast will send it hurtling across the horizon...It's got tons of little touches," Desi enthuses. "We have cops eating donuts for power-ups. You can urinate on the donut and then if the cop eats a pissed-on donut, he throws up. So if you're playing the game and you come across donuts, it's in your favor to piss on the donuts and put 'em back" ([Ajami](#)). Fans of Postal will undoubtedly be thrilled with this increased level of realism but critics say this adds to the existing Postal controversy by stating concern over the consequences of interactive, realistic violence.

Screenshot from Postal 2:  
Shooting a Bystander

Henk Krol, editor of a gay newspaper in the Netherlands, argued for a ban on Postal 2 because it allows the player to kill gays. He states that portraying gays as a stereotype such that they can be identified and gruesomely killed by the player encourages discrimination and violence against gays. "It is disgusting," Krol said. "In the Netherlands, we have anti-discrimination laws to protect people from discrimination based on sexual preference and that makes it easier to do something" ([Fleming](#)). Desi responded to this criticism by saying Postal 2 is not discriminatory against gays because they are just one of many possible targets in the game. "[Postal 2] is not anti-gay," Desi said. "All kinds of people -- straight and gay -- are game for the taking. It's fantasy. It's a game. It does not advocate violence of any kind in real life...No points are gained by killing, and the game can be played and won without shooting anyone," he said ("[Gay Activist Seeks Video Game Ban](#)"). Mike Riedel, RWS president agrees, "The real point is that you can play the game at either extreme, totally passive or completely aggressive, or anywhere in between, and the game will react appropriately" ([Running with Scissors](#)). Thus, it is [Running with Scissors'](#) opinion that the player is responsible for his or her choice of actions, simulated or otherwise, not the provider of the software.

It seems that Postal 2 has indeed done the seemingly impossible and surpassed Postal the original in causing controversy with socially unacceptable content. Accomplished with enhanced technology and unsurpassed creativity in violent design, Postal 2 promises to be at least as offensive and successful as its predecessor. Hopefully, RWS is right when they claim that video games such as Postal and Postal 2 allow safe simulated expression and comic relief as alternatives to real violence. These video games and similar violent shooters are very popular and it is important to understand their effects on the many players who enjoy them. More unbiased research needs to be done on adults playing violent video games. It is still debatable whether these are safe games for adults but they are certainly dangerous for children. Parents need to be educated about the rating system and monitor their child's play such that games like Postal and Postal 2 are not allowed. Finally, more research needs to be done on *why* some adults need violent video games to express inner rage. What is it about contemporary society that makes us feel rage when confronted with life's daily chores and comic relief when we can express this frustration with outrageous violence? It seems that part of the answer is the increased stress levels of modern life and desensitization to violence as visual medium such as film and video games, if not the real world, bring it into our daily lives. If this is the case, then the demand for violent video games will increase as stress and exposure to violence continue to rise. It is therefore critical that the effects of extremely violent video game play by adults be researched thoroughly and immediately, before any harm is done by erroneously allowing or restricting play of games like Postal and Postal 2.

## Works Cited

All websites were accessed in March of 2003.

Ajami, Amir. "Postal 2 Preview." Gamespot. March 21, 2002.

<<http://gamespot.com/gamespot/stories/previews/0,10869,2857233,00.html>>.

Anonymous. "Gay activist seeks video game ban." GFXartist.com.

<[http://www.gfxartist.com/general/general\\_news/13215](http://www.gfxartist.com/general/general_news/13215)>.

Byra, Josh. "20 Questions with Steve Wick." The Mushroom. March 4, 2002.

<<http://www.themushroom.com/20q/postal.html>>.

Fleming, Mike. "Going 'Postal' On Gays." The Washington Blade. March 14, 2003.

<<http://www.washingtonblade.com/forum/030207actionalert.php3>>.

Hollund, Kristian. "Postal 2 Interview." Payne Reactor.

<<http://www.paynereactor.com/articles/postal2interview.htm>>.

EB Games Online, Inc. "Postal 2." EB Games Online.

<<http://www.ebgames.com/ebx/categories/products/product.asp?pf%5Fid=233687>>.

Goldman, Jim. "Postal 2: Equal Opportunity Offender. Silly or Sick? An Interview with the Makers of the World's Most Violent Video Game." Tech TV. February 19, 2003.

<<http://www.techtv.com/news/culture/story/0,24195,3418240,00.html>>.

Nintzel, Jim. "Shoot to Thrill: Better Find Cover, the Postal Dude's Coming Back." Tucson Weekly.

<<http://www.tucsonweekly.com/tw/2002-12-12/feat.html>>.

Running with Scissors. Go Postal: Official Website of POSTAL 2. <[www.gopostal.com](http://www.gopostal.com)>.

Schliesman, Kyle. "Running with Scissors: Game designer pushing limits again." Inside Tucson Business. March 18, 2003.

<<http://www.azbiz.com/azbiz/myarticles.asp?H=1&S=358&P=552287&PubID=8312>>.

Saltzman, Marc. "Game Week in Review: Gary Coleman Goes Postal." USA Today. May 16, 2002.

<<http://www.usatoday.com/tech/techreviews/2002/5/17/spotlight.htm>>.

Tabloid News Service. "Mailmen Hate Bloody New Video Game." Tabloid. September 29, 1997.

<<http://www.tabloid.net/97/09/29/C1.html>>.

Von Kallenbach, Gareth. "Going Postal, Again." GameSpy. July 09, 2002.

<<http://www.gamespy.com/interviews/july02/postal/>>.