

'Death Race' Game Gains Favor, But Not With the Safety Council

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

A new coin-operated driving game called "Death Race" that puts players behind the wheel trying to run down humanoid figures on a television screen is apparently catching on in amusement parks around the country—to the outrage of the National Safety Council.

For a quarter, a player gets a minute to chase and run down all the symbolic pedestrians he can. Hitting one of the figures rewards the player with an electronic shriek and points scored on a grave-marker.

About 900 of the games have been built and sold so far to amusement arcades, fun parks and bars, according to the manufacturer, Exidy Inc., in Mountain View, Calif., halfway down the San Francisco peninsula.

Phil Brooks, the company's general manager, compares the game to a harmless "carton." He said in an interview: "It's like laughing at ourselves. None of us drive all that well. It's poking fun at our driving ability."

But the National Safety Council is not amused. An article in the winter issue of the nonprofit service organization's quarterly magazine, *Family Safety*, describes "Death Race" as "insidious," "morbid," "gross" and "sick, sick, sick."

"Nearly 9,000 pedestrians were killed last year and that's no joke," said Gerald Driessen, manager of the council's research department and a behavioral psychologist who was quoted extensively in the article. "It's not amusing."

"On TV, violence is passive," Dr. Driessen said in an interview. "In this game a player takes the first step to creating violence. The player is no longer just a spectator. He's an actor in the process."

Could it bring out violence during actual driving? "I'm sure most people playing this game do not jump in their car and drive at pedestrians," he said. "But one in a thousand? One in a million? And I shudder to think what will come next if this is encouraged. It'll be pretty gory."

The way "Death Race" is set up, a player—two can play side by side—stands at a steering wheel with his right foot on an "accelerator pedal." In front is the hood and wheels of a simulated racing car and a 23-inch television screen. At the drop of a quarter, stick figures called "gremlins" with arms and legs duck around obstacles on the screen, trying to avoid the on-rushing car.

Mr. Brooks of Exidy explains: "The object is to catch the gremlin with the vehicle. Now you can't actually catch him because he's faster. But you try to stay above or below him. When you approach an obstacle, he may come running out into the car. If he does you get a sound like a loud beep. He disappears and a tombstone appears and another gremlin comes out."

Problems With Tombstones

"As the playing field gets more and more littered with tombstones, it gets more difficult. If you hit a tombstone, you get a crashing sound and you have to "back up" and start again, Mr. Brooks went on.

"The highest score I've ever seen on 'Death Race' is 29 and that's our chief technician. I don't know how he did it."

On the game, a high scorer is called "expert driver." "That violates my sense of taste and decency," Dr. Driessen said.

Mr. Brooks denied that the game was violently graphic. "We have one of the best artists in the business," he said. "If we wanted to have cars running over pedestrians we could have done it to curl your hair."

Similarly, he insisted, the electronic hit sound is more of a beep than a scream. "We could have had screeching of tires, moans and screams for eight bucks extra," he said. "But," he added, "we wouldn't build a game like that. We're human beings, too."

"I'm also concerned about safety," added Mr. Brooks, who said he drives a Pantera sports racer—"a 160 miles-an-hour street machine"—and has never gotten a ticket "or hit anyone."

As it is, the games sell through distributors for about \$1,675 apiece. Exidy, Mr. Brooks said, is three years

old and makes lots of different games. Sales volume is between \$2.5 million and \$3 million, he said, "and going up rapidly, thanks in part to 'Death Race.'"

None of the games are in New York City, according to the state distributor in Rochester.

A few establishments, concerned about complaints and adverse publicity, have gotten rid of the machines. Marriott's Great America amusement park in Gurnee, Ill., "removed the game right after Mr. Marriott received the first complaint," according to a company official quoted in *Family Safety*. And Empire Distributing, Inc., the Chicago company that sold the game to Marriott and others, has also stopped, citing its "macabre" aspects, an Empire executive confirmed.

But Mr. Brooks was unfazed. "Every time a story comes out," he said, "we get more and more orders."