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Locating the wrongness in ultra-violent video games

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Abstract. The extremely high level of simulated violence in certain recent video games has made some people uneasy. There is a concern that something is wrong with these violent games, but, since the violence is virtual rather than real, it is difficult to specify the nature of the wrongness. Since there is no proven causal connection between video-game violence and real violence, philosophical analysis can be particularly helpful in locating potential sources of wrongness in ultra-violent video games. To this end, this paper analyzes video game violence through the lens of utilitarian, Kantian, and post-modern perspectives. Through these analyses, several explanations of the wrongness in violent video games emerge.

Key words: Baudrillard, children, computer games, ethics, Kant, utilitarianism, video games, violence, wrong

> ''What we were after now was the old surprise visit. That was a real kick and good for smecks and lashings of the ultra-violent.''[1]
>
> – Anthony Burgess, A Clockwork Orange

Introduction

In a British study conducted in 2001, researchers questioned schoolchildren about the activities they engaged in on their computers. Among 8, 9, and 10 year olds, the #1 activity was playing video games, with 88% of students participating in this activity.[2] Computer games also figured prominently for 11, 12, and 13 year olds, with 69% of them using their computers for video games. Notably, this report probably does not capture the full extent of the video game phenomenon; it does not account for the popular console platforms (e.g., Sony Playstation, Nintendo Gamecube), which recorded $9.9 billion in U.S. sales[3] alone, in 2004.[4]

Video games have always contained an element of violence. For example, in the old 1980s game Lode-Runner, you played as an intrepid treasure thief. You guided your little bright-green man-icon across the screen, and if you were caught by the darker-green man-icons (the guards) that were chasing you, you ''died.'' This was 1980s video-game violence.

Now, as we begin the new century, video games have changed. The rapid advances in computing technology have enabled game-makers to produce better graphics, which make the games far more realistic. A 1st-person 3-dimensional perspective is now possible, whereas in the 1980s, one was usually limited to a 3rd-person 2-dimensional perspective. More than ever, it seems as though ''you are there'' when one plays a video game.

One of the most worrisome changes in video games, however, is the dramatic increase in the intensity and realism of violence. Some video games are no longer merely violent – they are ultra-violent. The best example (so far) of this new ultra-violence can be found in the video game, *Manhunt*. In *Manhunt*, you play as death-penalty convict James Cash. Instead of being executed, as you expected, you have been kidnapped by a snuff-film maker. In order to survive, you must kill people for this filmmaker. The online game review service GameSpy describes some of the available methods of killing:

> Methods of disposal include garroting a hunter with some razor wire (and subsequent decapitation – yes, the head of your victim can be picked up and used as a projectile), suffocation with a regular

[1] Anthony Burgess. *A Clockwork Orange*. W.W. Norton Press, NY, 1962, p. 19.

[2] Bruce Hayward, Carys Alty, Stephen Pearson, and Chris Martin. *Young People and ICT*. U.K., 2002, http://www.becta.org.uk/page_documents/research/full_report.pdf.

[3] This figure includes both hardware (consoles) and software (games).

[4] NPD Group. The NPD Group Reports Annual 2004 U.S. Video Game Industry Retail Sales. *NPD Funworld*. http://www.npdfunworld.com/funServlet?nextpage=pr_body.html&content_id=2076.

> plastic bag, skull-crushing blows bestowed with a baseball bat, neck-rending hacks and slashes with a machete, and a good old house brick which can be used for breaking faces.[5]

It is hard to read this description without feeling some concern. If these acts were real, they would be unconscionable – one would be imprisoned forever, at the least, for committing them. However, the acts that are committed in *Manhunt* are virtual; no physical harm is actually being inflicted on anyone.

Yet, despite the fact that no one is physically harmed by these ultra-violent video games, some people still feel uneasy about them. Parents, in particular, are concerned about this issue. Surely, they think, there must be something wrong with crushing virtual heads with virtual baseball bats. Perhaps, concerned parents think to themselves, these games will make their children more callous or more violent. Yet, their computer-savvy children eagerly reassure them that the violence is "pretend," "not real," and "just a game." Thus, the crucial question is raised: if ultra-violent video games are wrong, where is the wrongness?

Utilitarian considerations

In his excellent, insightful article, "Is it wrong to play violent video games?," Matt McCormick uses utilitarian and Kantian ethical frameworks to analyze simulated evil acts. Although McCormick eventually concludes that violent video games may negatively affect one's character, his analysis suggests that these games cannot be deemed wrong according to Kantian or Utilitarian frameworks.[6] However, as I will try to demonstrate, McCormick's arguments, in these cases, have some weaknesses.

McCormick's utilitarian analysis begins with an account of utilitarianism. He notes that, for a particular type of act to be wrong under rule utilitarianism, the overall costs of that type of act must outweigh the benefits. He thus concludes, "... any argument against violent video games on these grounds needs to show that (1) there actually is an increase of risk, and (2) that increase of risk outweighs the benefits."[7]

McCormick is dubious about (1) – that violent video games pose a significant risk to society. Since it remains to be seen whether simulated bad acts cause an increase in actual bad acts, we therefore cannot assert that society is at increased risk. However, he suggests that more research on the effects of violent video games might be helpful in this regard.

McCormick thinks that (2) – that the risks of violent video games outweigh the benefits – is even harder to demonstrate. He rightly points out that significant social costs are accepted when they are associated with other long-established games. For example, sports fans occasionally riot after their team wins/loses, causing death and destruction. Yet, despite the fact that this is a significant social cost, no one suggests that football, soccer, basketball, or hockey should be banned.[8] Clearly, the pleasure that the millions of peaceful sports fans derive from their sport outweighs the social costs (e.g., violence within the game and fan riots) associated with it. Likewise, although there may be a risk associated with violent video games, it should be outweighed by the enormous pleasure that is derived from them by the fans of these games.

Although McCormick makes an excellent case, violent video games may still be problematic from a utilitarian standpoint. First, let's consider McCormick's first proposition more carefully:

> Proposition #1: Any argument against violent video games on these grounds needs to show that there is an actual increase of risk.

Most psychologists are not yet certain enough about the effects of violent video games to say that playing video games is *definitely* risky. However, some psychologists argue that VVGs *may* be risky because they *may* cause increased aggression. These researchers cite numerous studies in which a correlation has been demonstrated between playing violent video games and aggression. This evidence of *potential risk*[9] should not be ignored, and should be included in the utilitarian calculus. If one modifies Proposition #1 to account for potential risk, a new proposition results:

[5] Bryn Williams. Manhunt (PS2). *Gamespy*, http://archive.gamespy.com/reviews/november03/manhuntps2/index2.shtml.

[6] Matt McCormick. Is it wrong to play violent video games? *Ethics and Information Technology*, 3(4): 277–287, 2001.

[7] McCormick, p. 280.

[8] McCormick, pp. 280–281.

[9] A colleague of mine who is a specialist in operations research/risk management has criticized this notion of potential risk. "A risk of a risk is a risk," he says. To see what he means, suppose (purely for the sake of argument) that there is a 50% chance that ultra-violent video games cause aggressive thoughts. Suppose, further, that in 10% of those with aggressive thoughts, the aggressive thoughts lead to actual aggressive behavior toward others. One could multiply these probabilities together to generate a risk of 5% that playing video games leads to violent acts. Thus, a risk (50%) of a risk (10%) generates an overall risk (5%). Still, I think that this notion of potential risk is helpful because it highlights the uncertain status of the risks posed by violent video games.

> Proposition #1a: Any argument against violent video games on these grounds needs to show that there is **a significant potential for** an increase of risk.

At this point, however, an important objection can be raised. For any given activity, the potential risks seem to be infinite. For example, if I go out walking, I could get struck by lightening or hit by a car. Thus, it is important to limit the definition of "potential risk" to include only factors for which there is some credible evidence of risk, but not conclusive evidence.

In the case of violent video games, there is abundant scientific evidence which points in the direction of an increase in risk. Psychologists Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman recently conducted a meta-analytic review of the psychological literature on video game violence. Their analysis, which aggregated the results of 35 different studies, found that there was a statistically significant positive correlation between playing violent video games and aggressive behavior, aggressive thoughts, and aggressive feelings.[10] Their analysis also revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between violent video games and "prosocial" behavior.[11] Anderson and Bushman comment, "These results clearly support the hypothesis that exposure to violent video games poses a public-health threat to children and youths..."[12] Other meta-analytic reviews, by Sherry and by Dill and Dill, also show positive correlations between violent video games and aggression.[13],[14] Scientists are not unanimous on this point, however – one meta-analytic review concluded that, based on current research, it was impossible to conclude whether or not violent video games were correlated with aggressive behavior.[15]

Large numbers of correlations do not constitute proof of a causal link between virtual acts of violence and actual violent acts. However, if one considers the hypothesis that violent video games cause aggression from a Popperian point of view, the hypothesis has, for the most part, held up under testing.[16] Studies which show no correlation between violent video games and aggression would constitute falsifying evidence for this hypothesis, but according to the meta-analytic reviews cited above, a scant amount of this falsifying evidence has been collected. Since the hypothesis that violent video games cause aggression has not yet been falsified, despite significant testing, and is better tested then the opposite hypothesis (namely, that violent video games *don't* cause aggression), Popper would suggest that we should prefer it as a basis for action.[17] The notion that violent video games cause aggression is not just a logical possibility – it is a hypothesis that has been tested to some extent. Although one has to move away from Popper to reason inductively, it seems reasonable to hazard, based on available evidence, that violent video games *may* be risky.

Of course, affirming Proposition #1a is not enough to condemn virtual violence under the utilitarian schema. One must also fulfill McCormick's second proposition:

> Proposition #2: Any argument against violent video games on these grounds needs to show that the risks outweigh the benefits.

Suppose that we make a similar modification to #2 as we made to #1:

> Proposition #2a: Any argument against violent video games on these grounds needs to show that **there is a significant possibility that** the risks outweigh the benefits.

Suppose that there *was* a proven causal connection between simulated violent acts and actual acts of violence. If this were the case, then violent video games would impose a cost on society in the form of increased violence. This costs of increased violence would then be weighed against the benefits of video games – namely the pleasure that players derive from playing them. Although it is not certain that the costs of ultra-violent video games would outweigh the benefits, there is a significant possibility that they would. Since it is possible that there is a causal connection between simulated violent acts and actual acts of violence, it is also a significant possibility that the risks of ultra-violent video games outweigh the benefits. Therefore, if we accept Proposition #2a, we acquire a utilitarian ground on which to question the value of violent video games.

[10] Craig A. Anderson and Brad J. Bushman. Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggressive Behavior, Aggressive Cognition, Aggressive Affect, Physiological Arousal, and Prosocial Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Scientific Literature. *Psychological Science*, 12(5): 353–359, 2001, p. 358.

[11] Anderson and Bushman, p. 358.

[12] Anderson and Bushman, p. 358.

[13] John L. Sherry. The Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggression. *Human Communication Research*, 27(3): 409–431, 2001, p. 424.

[14] Karen E. Dill and Jody C. Dill. Video Game Violence: A Review of the Empirical Literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 3(4): 407–428, 1998, p. 420.

[15] Mark Griffiths, Violent Video Games and Aggression: A Review of the Literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 4(2): 203–210, 1999, p. 211.

[16] Karl Popper. The Problem of Induction. In David Miller, editor, *Popper Selections*, pp. 101–117. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985.

[17] Popper, p. 114.

At this point, some readers might allege that, by modifying McCormick's grounds, I have put forward a strange version of utilitarianism that involves ***chances*** of costs and ***chances*** of benefits instead of simple costs and benefits. However, this version of utilitarianism is not so strange – my proposed calculations are very similar to the expected value calculations that economists might make. Consider the following case, which involves an expected value calculation:

> You are entered in a lottery. You have a 10% chance of winning \$1000, and a 90% of losing \$200.

$$\text{Expected value} = (10\% * \$1000 + 90\% * (-\$200))$$

$$\text{Expected value} = (\$100 - \$180) = -\$80$$

In this lottery, which involves a ***chance*** of costs and a ***chance*** of benefits, the expected value is −\$80. Thus, unless one is a desperate gambler, this is probably not a good lottery to enter.

However, unlike the lottery example above, three of the four values in the equation for the expected value of violent video games are uncertain: the value of the costs and benefits of violent video games, as well as the % change of costs. Since people undoubtedly gain pleasure from playing video games, one can say that the % chance of benefits is 100%.

$$\begin{aligned}&\text{Expected value of violent video games}\\ &= [(\%\text{chance of benefits}(100\%)\\ &\quad * \text{benefits per individual})\\ &\quad - (\%\text{chance of costs} * \text{costs per individual})]\end{aligned}$$

Since it contains three uncertain variables, the outcome of such an expected value calculation is uncertain. If the costs are low or non-existent, it might be favorable for society. If the costs are so high as to exceed the benefits, it might have to be assessed as unfavorable, and therefore wrong. Thus, after thinking through this expected value calculation, a utilitarian might err on the side of caution by suspending judgment about violent video games until more information about the costs of these games was available. After all, although it may not be wrong to engage in something that is only *potentially* wrong, it could plausibly be deemed *imprudent*.

Kantian considerations

When analyzing violent video games according to a Kantian ethical framework, it is appropriate to begin with Kant's categorical imperative. McCormick quotes two different formulations of the categorical imperative:

1. Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.[18]
2. So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.[19]

As McCormick points out, casual violence against other human beings obviously violates the first statement of the categorical imperative.[20] However, when one plays a violent video game, one is not doing violence against other humans in any direct sense. When one plays a violent video game, one attacks either another human player's character, or some character generated by the game itself (e.g., a monster, a bad human). Thus, it seems as though violent video games do not violate the categorical imperative.

However, it is also important to consider the possibility that, when playing a violent video game, one uses oneself as a mere means. In the second formulation quoted above, Kant suggests that we must never use ourselves as mere means. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant elaborates further on our duties to ourselves. According to Kant, we have duties to ourselves as animals and as moral beings. Kant writes of the vices contrary to the duties to oneself:

> These [vices] adopt principles that are directly contrary to his character as a moral being, that is, to inner freedom, the innate dignity of a human being, which is tantamount to saying that they make it one's basic principle to have no basic principle and hence no character, that is, to throw oneself away and make oneself an object of contempt.[21]

Kant specifies lying, avarice, and false humility as examples of vices that are contrary to our duties to ourselves. However, any vice that is harmful to a person's character as a moral being would probably suffice. Thus, if a person acts cruelly when playing an ultra-violent video game, then this would constitute a

[18] Immanuel Kant[a]. Mary Gregor, translator. Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. In Mary Gregor, editor, *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 37–108. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 73.

[19] Kant[a], p. 80.

[20] McCormick, p. 282.

[21] Immanuel Kant[b]. Mary Gregor, translator. The Metaphysics of Morals. In Mary Gregor, editor, *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 353–604. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 545.

violation of that person's duty to his/herself. Of course, one could argue that it was not possible for the act to be cruel, since it was directed at a simulation, not a "real person." If one accepts this argument,[22] one must look for other grounds on which to question violent video games. This brings us to Kant's remarks on our duties to animals, to which McCormick rightly draws our attention.

In *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant comments, "Since animals are an analogue of humanity, we observe duties to mankind when we observe them as analogues to this, and thus cultivate our duties to humanity."[23] Not surprisingly, Kant thought that our treatment of animals would have effects on our treatment of humans. In this regard, he tells a lovely anecdote about Leibniz:

> Leibniz put the grub he had been observing back on the tree with its leaf, lest he should be guilty of doing any harm to it. It upsets a man to destroy such a creature for no reason, and this tenderness is subsequently transferred to man.[24]

Kant notes that the opposite effect is possible – he alleges that in England, butchers and surgeons[25] are not allowed to serve on juries, because they are "inured to death."[26]

If animals can be said to be an analogue of humanity, perhaps video-game characters are as well. After all, video-game characters are often representations of humans. If it is wrong to gouge out the eyes of a cat because it inures us to cruelty (one among many reasons why cruelty to animals is wrong), then perhaps it is wrong to gouge out the eyes of a video-game character for the same reason. McCormick, however, takes a dim view of this sort of reasoning. He remarks:

> Whether or not such behavior makes one more likely to violate one's duties to others is one of the few clearly empirical matters in Kant's ethics and could be settled with a careful study of what game players and non-game players are prone to do.[27]

My reasoning in the utilitarianism section applies here as well: if we don't understand the link between violent video games and actual violence, perhaps it is more prudent to err on the side of caution.

McCormick then gives the following analysis of Kant:

> And even if it turns out that Kant is right and engaging in some activities makes it more likely that we will violate our duties to others, it does not follow that that activity is therefore wrong. Notice that Kant does not argue that no one should be a butcher or a surgeon, even though it has a detrimental effect on the performance of their moral duties.[28]

I disagree with McCormick's remarks here. The reason that Kant tolerates butchers and surgeons is because we *need* them – butchers and surgeons play important roles within society. Kant notes that doctors sometimes perform cruel experiments on animals in the interest of medical research and he deems this cruelty acceptable, because "it is employed for a good purpose."[29] However, Kant deems cruelty to animals, for the sake of sport, to be unacceptable. The playing of violent video games is far more analogous to cruelty for sport than it is to medical research. One could easily imagine a good society that did not include violent video games, whereas the same cannot be easily said of medical research.

To summarize: in this section, two Kantian grounds for questioning video games have been located. First, if playing violent video games involve acts of cruelty, those acts violate our duties to ourselves. Second, video game characters, like animals, may be analogues of humanity. If we do not treat human analogues with respect, it may make us less likely to perform our duties toward other human beings.

Simulation unease

According to the analysis above, violent video games raise troubling questions under both utilitarian and Kantian ethical frameworks. Thus, we have located two potential justifications for our collective unease about ultra-violent video games. However, just because one can justify deeming something wrong or imprudent doesn't mean that one has located the source of why it makes one feel uneasy. Consider the case of animal abuse: we might say, "We should not abuse animals because the abuse has bad effects on the perpetrators." Although this statement justifies our deeming animal abuse wrong, it does not really

[22] I don't accept this argument. Although a virtual act of cruelty is not necessarily a cruel act, I think that it is possible to commit a virtual act of cruelty with cruel intentions. Insofar as this is the case, a virtual act of cruelty is a cruel act.

[23] Immanuel Kant[c]. Peter Heath, translator. Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind, editors, *Lectures on Ethics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 212.

[24] Kant[c], pp. 212–213.

[25] Surgeons are included with butchers here because surgeons performed experiments on animals.

[26] Kant[c], p. 213.

[27] McCormick, pp. 283–284.

[28] McCormick, p. 284.

[29] Kant[c], p. 213.

locate the source of our unease about animal abuse.[30] Likewise, although the above applications of utilitarian and Kantian ethical frameworks may justify deeming ultra-violent video games wrong, these analyses may not have located the real source of our unease about these games.

In Book II of Plato's *Republic*, Adeimantus advances a disturbing argument:

> But they tell me that an unjust person, who has secured for himself a reputation for justice, lives the life of a god. Since, then, 'opinion forcibly overcomes truth' and 'controls happiness,' as the wise men say, I must surely turn entirely to it. I should create a façade of illusory virtue around me to deceive those who come near, but keep behind it the greedy and crafty fox of the wise Archilochus.[31]

Adeimantus challenges Socrates to prove that virtue is a good that should be valued for itself, rather than merely for its reputational effects. Much of the rest of the book is dedicated to the argument that justice is to be valued for its own sake.

The problem which Plato has identified is that it is hard to tell the difference between a truly virtuous individual and a good simulator of virtue. For example, it is possible that Mother Teresa wasn't a virtuous person after all – perhaps she was merely a simulator of virtue. Indeed, the suspicion that our models of virtue may not be virtuous pervades our society; the press takes great delight whenever a supposed pillar of the community is toppled.

What is it that disturbs us so much about simulated virtue? Certainly, one thing that disturbs us is the fact that the perpetrators of this fraud are getting away with it. The rewards of simulated virtue are tremendous, and the postulated punishments are possibly non-existent. Granted, it is comforting to maintain that (a) non-virtuous people are unhappy, or (b) that these people will burn in hell in the next world. However, there is distressing lack of evidence in support of either (a) or (b).

Ultimately, though, what may really drive us to despair is the fact that ***there is no way to tell the difference between real and simulated virtue in others***. This is analogous to not being able to tell the difference between gold and dirt. Why bother collecting gold or valuing gold when you can't tell it apart from dirt? If you can't tell the difference between gold and dirt, then there is only one thing that can happen to gold: it must be ***devalued*** – it becomes as worthless as dirt. Likewise, when one cannot tell the difference between virtue and simulated virtue, then virtue, as a moral value, gets ***devalued***.

In "The Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard asserts that a fake holdup may arouse more outrage than a real holdup.[32] Of course, it is understandable why a fake holdup should provoke outrage; it wastes the time of the police. However, suggests Baudrillard, a fake holdup may well generate *more* outrage than a real holdup.[33] This surplus of outrage does not seem justified merely by the novelty of the fake holdup – after all, in a fake holdup, no one is in any real danger except the perpetrators of the act. By contrast, in a real holdup, there is an intention to steal property and a significant possibility that non-perpetrators will be injured. Baudrillard attempts to explain the roots of this surplus outrage – he notes that the real holdup "does nothing but disturb the order of things, the right to property, whereas the [simulated holdup] attacks the reality principle itself."[34] Simulated crime blurs the difference between crime and non-crime. When one cannot distinguish between crime and simulated crime, the idea of crime must be ***devalued***. The possibility of such devaluation threatens the basis of the law itself, and Baudrillard seems to think that it is this threat that fuels the outrage over the fake holdup.

Unfortunately, Baudrillard's example here is not entirely convincing. Novelty seems sufficient to explain the amount of excess attention given a fake holdup. People are much more interested in stories

[30] I suspect that our source of unease in this case is the suffering of the animals.

[31] Plato. G.M.A. Grube, translator. Republic. In John Cooper, editor, *Plato: Complete Works*, pp. 971–1223. Hackett, Indianapolis, 1997, 365b.

[32] Jean Baudrillard. Sheila Faria Glaser, translator. The Precession of Simulacra. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, pp. 159–162. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1994, p. 20.

[33] It is, of course, an empirical question whether a fake holdup *does*, in fact, generate surplus outrage. In the case of a recent fake robbery staged by art students in Rhode Island ("Students filming fake robbery confronted by police"), the event generated a 908-word news story. On the same day, in the same paper, a story about a carjacking ("City man changed in Tiverton carjacking"") received less prominent placement in the paper, and only 222 words of coverage. Source: The Providence Journal, March 24, 2005. An incident in Newcastle, England ("Armed Shop Raid was a Sick Prank") received 253 words of coverage from the local paper, while, on the same day, an actual robbery at a post office ("Robbery Terror") received only 65 words. "Robbery Terror," however, received more prominent placement in the paper. Source: The Evening Chronicle [Newcastle], March 11, 2005. In these two examples, fake robberies inspired at least as much interest as more serious crimes committed on the same day. This is not sufficient evidence to support Baudrillard's statement that fake crimes generate surplus outrage, but it does not refute Baudrillard's claims either.

[34] Baudrillard, p. 20.

about novel occurrences (e.g., staging a fake robbery) than they are in stories about everyday events (e.g., a robbery). However, the fact that the example is problematic does not imply that the concern about devaluation is invalid.

Consider what happens when a similar line of reasoning about devaluation is applied to violent video games. Suppose that the protagonist in a violent video game slashes a computer-generated character to death with a machete. If a murder is committed in the real world, the individual is thrown in jail. However, when one commits a violent act within a computer game, the conventional wisdom is that there is nothing wrong with it. Of course, as the preceding account has suggested, the conventional wisdom may incorrect. Nevertheless, the fact remains that an act, which is uncomfortably similar to acts which we would normally think of as wrong, is permitted within the context of a computer game. As video games increase in verisimilitude, and continue to up the ante in terms of violence, it will become increasingly difficult to differentiate between real transgressions (which everyone knows are wrong) and simulated transgressions (which everyone knows are OK). If one cannot differentiate between real transgressions and simulated transgressions, then one has to ***devalue the idea of wrongness***.

Essentially, I am arguing that wrongness can be devalued in the same way that money can. If a large supply of counterfeit money, which could not be distinguished from real money, were to enter the money supply, money would become less valuable. Likewise, if simulated acts were possible that look wrong, seem wrong, and thus cannot easily be distinguished from real wrong acts, wrongness becomes less useful as a moral value. In other words, it becomes devalued.

Several objections could be advanced against this line of thinking. First, one could object that wrongness and money are not analogous. There are clearly tremendous differences between people's everyday interactions with money and their interactions with wrongness. However, money and wrongness are analogous in one very important way: both wrongness and money can be thought of as measuring sticks. Money is a measure of exchange value, while wrongness is a measure of moral value. Just as counterfeit currency may erode the value of money as a measure, so too may simulated wrong acts erode the value of wrongness as a measure.

Another difficulty is that this analogy seems to rely on an event that hasn't happened yet: the arising of a close similarity between the real world and the simulated worlds within video games. It is hard to tell the difference between counterfeit money and real money, but it is easy to differentiate simulated wrong acts from their real counterparts. Perhaps, then, the devaluation concern means that we should be worried about the ultra-realistic video games of the future, but not the crude games of today.

The ultra-realistic games of the future are certainly more worrisome from a devaluation perspective, but contemporary games cannot be let off the hook. When I played *Manhunt* in the course of my research for this essay, I realized, intellectually, that I was in a simulation, but the simulation felt uncomfortably real to me while I was playing it. Of course, I also realized that my virtual acts were not the same as real transgressions, but the acts certainly *felt* transgressive to me while I was committing them. The way in which even crude virtual worlds can feel real to people has been examined by Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen*. Turkle notes that some computer users are reluctant to grant priority to the real lives as opposed to their virtual lives in online role-playing games. One of her subjects comments, "Real life is just one more window ... and it's not usually my best one."[35] Another player says of his virtual environment, "It's where I live ... more than I do in my dingy dorm room. There's no place like home."[36] If the virtual worlds of today's ultra-violent video games can feel like real worlds for gamers, then there is reason to believe that a devaluation of wrongness may be occurring.

A final difficulty with this money/wrongness devaluation analogy is that it is difficult to provide empirical evidence in favor of it. In the case of money, devaluation has happened before and is an easy phenomenon to identify; money no longer buys what it once did, or it stops functioning completely.[37] The devaluation of wrongness would be much harder to spot. As I asserted above, I would predict that wrongness, like money, would become less useful as a moral value as it became devalued. However, unlike monetary devaluation, which, when problematic, occurs rapidly, the devaluation of wrongness is something that would probably sneak up on us slowly. One can assert that video games are devaluing wrongness, and one can provide a conceptual argument in favor of this hypothesis (the money/wrongness analogy), but one cannot look at the world and say, "Look, here is

[35] Sherry Turkle. *Life on the Screen*. Simon and Schuster, NY, 1995, p. 13.

[36] Turkle, p. 21.

[37] For example, in 1923, one trillion German marks were worth one dollar. The mark had, effectively, ceased functioning as currency. See George W. Goodman. *Paper Money*, Summit Books, NY, 1981, p. 57.

definite evidence that video games are eroding the idea of wrongness.''

Clearly, several powerful objections can be raised against the devaluation hypothesis. Yet, this hypothesis does raise a novel possibility in the quest to locate the wrongness in violent video games. Violent video games may be wrong because they threaten to devalue (or may be already devaluing) the very *idea of wrongness*. Perhaps it is this fact – that *wrongness* itself is threatened – that explains the unease people have about ultra-violent video games.

It is easy to find grounds on which to object to this suggestion, however. When politicians speak against violent video games, one doesn't often hear, ''We must stop our children from playing violent video games because these games threaten the very idea of wrongness.'' The idea that wrongness itself is threatened is subtle; it is hard to understand it and to communicate it to others. If so few people understand the idea that wrongness itself is in danger, how can it be that this is the root of our unease?

One does not have to possess full understanding of a situation in order to appreciate the fact that something dangerous is happening. Imagine that you are a member of a herd of cattle, and your herdmates, Bessie and Flossie, have been hauled away in a truck. Due to your extremely limited intellect, you can't formulate the proposition, ''Bessie and Flossie have been hauled away in a truck.'' Still, you understand that there has been some kind of a disappearance, and you feel a sense of unease in your bovine heart.

It is possible that the human herd, of which we are all members, experiences an analogous phenomenon. If the idea of wrongness is gradually disappearing, we may notice that *something* important is disappearing, even if, like cattle, we are too dumb to pinpoint the exact nature of the disappearance. When we feel uneasy and uncertain about how to discuss the wrongness of violent video games, our unease may stem from the slow, inexorable erosion of the idea of wrongness itself.

On the other hand, however, our moral intuition about ultra-violent video games may have innumerable other possible sources. Perhaps our fears stem from the as-yet-uncertain negative effects that video games may have on the individuals who play them. Our fear might also stem simply from an innate conservatism – video games are, after all, a relatively new phenomenon, and society is sometimes fearful of the new. Ultimately, the unease about violent video games is too vague and unarticulated for us to pinpoint its source. Still, the possibility that our unease is prompted by the devaluation of wrongness is an intriguing and worrisome one.

Conclusion

This analysis has indicated that there are good utilitarian and Kantian reasons to be concerned about ultra-violent video games. In addition, as I indicated in the final section on simulation unease, there may also be reasons to believe that violent video games are undermining the idea of wrongness.

In ''On Nihilism,'' Baudrillard remarks, ''If it is nihilistic to be obsessed by the mode of disappearance and no longer by the mode of production, then I am a nihilist.''[38] Ultra-violent video games are a phenomenon that may presage the beginning of a grand disappearance. Perhaps each time someone wields the virtual knife, spattering bright red into the fading black pixels of the monitor, perhaps as the screams of the most recent silicon victims echo from the speakers of the computer, another event – less noticeable, but more dangerous – is taking place. Perhaps, each time someone plays an ultra-violent video game, the idea of wrongness slips a little further into the mist.

[38] Jean Baudrillard. Sheila Faria-Glaser, translator. On Nihilism. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, pp. 159–162. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1994, p. 162.