

Defending the morality of violent video games

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Abstract The effect of violent video games is among the most widely discussed topics in media studies, and for good reason. These games are immensely popular, but many seem morally objectionable. Critics attack them for a number of reasons ranging from their capacity to teach players weapons skills to their ability to directly cause violent actions. This essay shows that many of these criticisms are misguided. Theoretical and empirical arguments against violent video games often suffer from a number of significant shortcomings that make them ineffective. This essay argues that video games are defensible from the perspective of Kantian, Aristotelian, and utilitarian moral theories.

Keywords Aristotle · Computer game · Kant · Utilitarianism · Video game · Violence · Virtual world

One of the most controversial and practically significant topics in the study of contemporary media is whether there is a connection between violent entertainment and aggressive behavior. In recent years, video games have replaced television, movies, and music as the primary concern. Video game violence has received a great deal of attention, yet for all the discussion of it, we know surprisingly little. The debate seems to be deadlocked, with empirical and theoretical work supporting and attacking

violent video games making little progress toward a definitive conclusion. This is for two reasons. First, the empirical studies do not consistently one side. Most suggest that simulated violence is harmful, but there is a significant body of work reaching the opposite conclusion, as well as studies showing bias among researchers critical of gaming. More importantly, games seem to have no effect on crime as an increased propensity to aggression suggests that they would. Second, the ongoing debate about video game violence suffers from some problems of framing. Violent gaming is often made out to be a single issue, when in fact there are multiple interrelated questions that must be addressed. This essay will show that violent games are not immoral on Kantian, Aristotelian, or utilitarian grounds, except in some limited circumstances. In doing so, it will also seek to clarify the study of video game violence by illustrating the different types of critiques that opponents tend to make.

Judging games from a Kantian or Aristotelian standpoint is primarily a theoretical, while the utilitarian approach requires empirical study. Analyzing these as distinct parts of the anti-violent gaming argument helps to see what counts as evidence for each perspective. The first part of this essay looks at gaming using each of these three moral theories and assesses how each would assess violent gaming. It explicates some of the major arguments made for and against violent games and proposes several new reasons why there is little reason to find violent video games morally objectionable. The second part considers some of the empirical work critical of violent games. It looks at three main empirical charges made against violent games: that they train players in the skills needed to harm others, that they degrade players' capacity for empathy, and that they directly encourage antisocial behavior.

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Morality in the virtual world

Kantian ethics

From the Kantian perspective we must focus on how players act in the digital world; what makes us moral or immoral is how we treat others in the game and what intentions inform our actions. Drawing on Kant's moral philosophy, McCormick argues that what makes us good or bad players is whether we respect opponents.¹ This comes from Kant's second formulation of the Categorical Imperative: to treat ourselves and other people as ends in themselves rather than only as means to an end.² To use McCormick's example, one who gloats over a victory or uses it against the opponent is behaving poorly. The reason this is inappropriate is that the poor sportsman focuses on personal interest and treats the opponent as a means of gratification. McCormick argues that this is also true of the poor sportsman who loses. A player filled with self-pity in defeat is just as bad as the gloating winner because of the lack of respect he shows the opponent. Thus, McCormick thinks that as long as we do not violate the categorical imperative in our play, we do nothing morally wrong. This analysis is sound, and the attacks made against it do not refute McCormick's point.

Waddington takes issue with McCormick's Kantian defense of games and counters with an analogy to Kant's analysis of our duties toward animals.³ Although animals are not, according to Kant, moral beings, we must treat them kindly because they are analogous to humans. Waddington extends this to video game characters, saying that they are analogous to humans because they look like us. This argument is unconvincing as it makes an unsupported leap from the resemblance of humans to other animals to the resemblance of humans to representations of humans. Representations are clearly analogous to their objects, but not in a way that Kant would consider meaningful. Kant's comparison of humans to animals works because it moves from one group of living beings to another, and because there is a demonstrable biological and psychological relationship between humans and other animals. Characters in video games may look like people, but they lack consciousness, the ability to feel pain, and any biological resemblance to humans apart from their outward appearance. More significantly, their relation to us is superficial even when compared to distant animal relatives because avatars are not autonomous; their relation to us is only in appearance. We would certainly not think of extending moral duties to realistic paintings, photographs,

or videos of humans even though these can be more realistic than video games because their lack of life and autonomy makes them superficial analogues. Likewise, if we follow Waddington's argument, then this might lead us to consider some video game characters morally relevant, and others irrelevant, purely by virtue of whether they are similar enough to humans to count. Such a line of demarcation would be difficult, if not impossible, to draw; it would require some point of graphical realism at which one action goes from being acceptable to immoral.⁴

Waddington also addresses the similarity between actions in the real world and virtual world, saying that cruelty is more defensible when it serves a good purpose but that "the playing of violent video games is far more analogous to cruelty for sport than it is to medical research".⁵ Again, the argument suffers from the unsupported analogy. Just as characters in video games bear little substantive resemblance to real people, actions in the game are vastly different from their equivalents in the real world. In this case, there is nothing worthy of being called "cruelty" in video games because the characters are not capable of feeling pain or suffering. There is no object of the aggression that is capable of feeling pain or suffering. One cannot be cruel to an inanimate object and this is exactly what characters in games are. Until we are prepared to extend moral duties to photographs or other superficial human analogues, we cannot link moral obligation to this sort of resemblance.

While Waddington's objection to McCormick fails to show that the Kantian defense is wrong, McCormick's analysis is limited. It does not address the alternate ways one might assess games from a Kantian perspective. McCormick focuses on the second formulation of the categorical imperative, but we can also find support elsewhere. Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative, "*act in accordance with a maxim that can at the same time make itself a universal law*",⁶ can likewise be mobilized in defense of violent video games. The actions performed within the virtual world can be made into universal maxims without contradiction. Murder is an obvious example of something that is not universalizable in the real world. It is wrong by Kantian standards because one person's act of killing, when made universal, would

¹ McCormick (2001).

² Kant (1999).

³ Waddington (2007) p. 125.

⁴ A demarcation line would likewise be difficult because the standards of what is considered violent change over time. "Using today's standards, "Pac-Man", and other early videogames like "Space Invaders", "Defender", and "Asteroids" appear relatively non-threatening, however, in the early 1980s these games were characterized as violent." Newman (2004) p. 66. Standards would have to be revisable and arbitrary, and these are not characteristics of deontological moral rules.

⁵ Waddington, p. 125.

⁶ Kant, p. 86.

make murder generally acceptable. In the virtual world, where attacking avatars does no real harm, it is unproblematic for all players to act aggressively. We can make a universal maxim, “it is acceptable to kill the avatars of non-player characters or willing combatants”, without any contradiction.

There is also the matter of intent—a central category in Kant’s moral philosophy. In the real world, murder involves intent to kill, and it is this intention that the deontological perspective finds morally reprehensible. For Kant, simply intending to kill is wrong even if the intention is never carried out. Games involve simulated killings, but players do not intend to kill another person when they play. They only mean to destroy an avatar. In other words, what the player does cannot be considered immoral unless it involves the intention to actually harm someone. Thus, in most cases virtual aggression has a much different character based on the players’ intentions. However, this example also suggests that there are circumstances in which it game violence is immoral: those in which one intentionally harms another person by attacking their avatar or stealing their virtual property.

From a Kantian standpoint, in-game killings in which one player kills the avatar of another real person differ from those in which the player kills an NPC. The reasons for the difference is the psychological connection people form with avatars. For many, avatars are an extension of one’s own identity, or at least a form of property. Autonomy is the critical difference between a player’s character and a non-player character. Players connect to their avatars and feel that they are an expression of themselves. Some spend hours a day for months and even years building up their characters and providing them with special items.⁷ They are marks of personal achievement. For many players, there is an enormous investment in the avatar to the extent that a person’s ego is bound to it. This is not as strange as it may sound, nor is it unique to games. It is essentially the same process as that which underlies human labor in general. When a person puts a great deal of work into creating something that product becomes significant—an extension of the person that created it. Thus, Wolfendale is right to point out that “we cannot dismiss avatar attachment as morally insignificant without being forced to also dismiss other, more acceptable, forms of attachment such as attachment to possessions, people and cultural objects and communities”.⁸

In many games, the avatars are 3D representations of the players themselves, giving them a physical identification with the character they control in addition to the psychological connection. For some, the avatar is more real than

their own body as it is something chosen voluntarily and made to reflect the player’s identity. “Avatars are therefore far more than mere online objects manipulated by a user. They are the embodied conception of the participants’ self through which she communicates with others in the community”.⁹ For some, this avatar facilitates the player’s most meaningful contact with the world.¹⁰ Andy Clark and David Chalmers in “The Extended Mind”¹¹ say that a person is not only a mind but also their entire body and that what counts as us may extend beyond the body. This is why disrupting a person’s environment can lead to harm that is equivalent to hurting the individual. Johansson uses their argument as the basis for extending the identity beyond physical existence. “If the skin/skull boundary is *unattainable*, then the way we think of moral agents must also change accordingly”.¹² He concludes that it is morally justified and perhaps even obliged to punish avatars for their actions. On this basis, we can likewise conclude that it is justified to regard harm done to an avatar as harm done against the individual because it is an extension of the player.

This is why some extreme cases of virtual abuse have been taken seriously by law enforcement. In Japan, there is a precedent of legal action in defense of those harmed in games. A 43 year-old Japanese woman was arrested in 2008 for murdering an avatar in *Maple Story*, a hugely popular online role-playing game with around 50 million subscribers. The other player divorced her character in the game, leading her to seek revenge. She told officers that the suddenness of the divorce enraged her. She carried out the attack by logging onto the man’s account and destroying the character that he built up over a year. She could be punished by up to 5 years in prison and a fine of \$5,000.¹³

This does not mean that all harm done to another player is immoral. It is not immoral to attack another player-controlled character. Rather, the immorality consists in psychologically harming the person that controls the avatar. Therefore, the exception to the Kantian defense of violent video games is that actions in the game are immoral when they are intended to harm another person psychologically. One player killing another’s avatar in a consensual fight would therefore not count as immoral, nor would a NPC’s attack the player’s character count as immoral. One violates Kant’s moral principles by cheating to harm other players or misleading someone into a nonconsensual fight. Paradoxically, there may actually be more chance for this kind of harm in games that do not focus on fighting. In

⁹ Wolfendale, p. 114.

¹⁰ Klastrop (2009).

¹¹ Clark and Chalmers (1998).

¹² Johansson (2000) p. 76.

¹³ Jilted Woman ‘Murdered Avatar’ (2008).

⁷ Chappell et al. (2006), Simon et al. (2009), Taylor (2006).

⁸ Wolfendale (2007) p. 112.

non-violent games, players might reasonably expect that their characters will not be harmed, while players of violent games generally accept the possibility that their character might be killed and that it may suffer lasting penalties for dying. In *EverQuest*, for example, a dead player is penalized, but this risk is understood and accepted by players who knowingly participate in a game that puts their avatar at risk. In a nonviolent game, by contrast, players probably do not wish to fight other players and certainly would not expect attacks on their character that involve cheating, as in the preceding example.

Aristotelian virtue ethics

Although McCormick defends violent video games on utilitarian and Kantian grounds, he says that they are probably indefensible from an Aristotelian perspective. He argues that an Aristotelian would say that “By participating in simulations of excessive, indulgent and wrongful acts, we are cultivating the wrong sort of character”.¹⁴ On this point, McCormick overstates Aristotle’s disdain for violence. Sicart even accuses him of trying to fit Aristotle into this position because McCormick wants to find basis on which to criticize video games.¹⁵ Cogburn and Silcox correctly point out that Aristotle only opposes certain expressions of violence. He believed that “certain displays of violent entertainment can actually have a morally edifying effect on the audience”.¹⁶ Aristotle might dislike some violent video games, but he would not oppose all of them since he does not object to violence as such. What is objectionable is violence that is irreconcilable with virtue. On the other hand, some virtues are exemplified in combat. Aristotle makes this clear in his discussion of courage by using the example of a soldier going into battle.¹⁷ If he thinks that one can act virtuously in the act of killing actual people, then he would certainly accept that there are some cases in which simulated violence might be justified.

Given Aristotle’s emphasis on learning virtue through practice, he would find much to praise in games that provide simulations of moral dilemmas. In many games, there is destruction for its own sake, but those with sophisticated moral choice engines give the player the option of using violence for good or evil ends.¹⁸ In *Fallout 3*, for example,

every quest has several possible resolutions that lead to distinct paths depending on whether one chooses to be good or evil.¹⁹ Much of the game depends on the player’s moral choice and this in turn, creates a moral standing that affects the way characters in the game behave. Similarly, other games have moral choice engines and have employed a variety of means to make choices meaningful. *BioShock* focuses on one extreme choice that is repeated throughout the game: whether to harm a child for the sake of character improvement, or to be a good person that progresses slowly.²⁰ The defensibility of games from the Aristotelian perspective is not something that can be decided apart from a careful look at individual games and the kinds of moral training they provide the player. The best way to assess the morality of video games from an Aristotelian perspective is on a case-by-case basis. Games are good or bad to the extent that they provide players with meaningful moral simulations that can improve their decision making. Not all games are moral by Aristotle’s standards, but none are objectionable simply because they are violent. On the contrary, games are a potentially valuable source of moral training, even when they are violent, as long as scenarios are constructed in a way that allows players to practice working through moral dilemmas that are analogous to the ones that may be faced in real life.

Utilitarianism

On utilitarian grounds, McCormick argues that even if games have the effect of increasing the risk of violent incidents they have a number of positive benefits that may outweigh the potential harm. He cites three primary reasons why games may be positive. First, they are fun and have a clear value in entertaining consumers that can outweigh some costs that they might incur.²¹ Reynolds agrees with this in his utilitarian analysis of *Grand Theft Auto 3*, as he argues that games may offend and degrade different groups, but a utilitarian cannot consider this apart from the pleasure they give players. Reynolds argues that the value of the entertainment is greater than that of their harm as these games are responsible for giving what he estimates to be over a billion hours of entertainment to millions of people.²² Seen from Bentham’s formulation of utilitarianism, in which the quality of the pleasure does not matter, this argument is powerful. While it is difficult to measure the harm done to those offended by the game, it is clear from sales that millions of people derive pleasure from

¹⁴ McCormick, p. 286.

¹⁵ Sicart (2009) p. 13.

¹⁶ Cogburn and Silcox (2009) p. 51.

¹⁷ Aristotle (1999) p. 45–50.

¹⁸ Here “good” and “evil” only refer to the quality of the actions within the virtual world. Virtual murder is not evil, but it is in the context of the game, as judged by the other players or non-player characters. The good and evil actions in the game do not have any real moral meaning, but from an Aristotelian perspective they can still be meaningful forms of practice in cultivating a virtuous character.

¹⁹ Schulzke (2009).

²⁰ Tavinor (2009).

²¹ McCormick, p. 280.

²² Reynolds (2002) p. 4.

gaming; the time many devote to them is likewise a sign that they are a source of happiness.

McCormick's second and third reasons are that games fuel the economy, directly and indirectly. The direct effect from video game sales keeps a multi-billion dollar industry strong. Indirectly, video games help in developing new technologies that are useful outside the entertainment industry, and they are useful in creating simulations for various occupations. While the first strength of video games is more likely the appeal to a Benthamite utilitarian who is concerned with the maximization of happiness regardless of its quality, the second and third reasons are strong even when judged by the more stringent Millian standards. They are noble benefits of gaming that raise it above other activities that are only oriented toward maximizing individual pleasure. To this list of benefits, we can add many others. Among these is that gaming leads to improved visual perception and cognition of space.²³ Action video games were found to be particularly helpful in this respect, as they are able to quickly raise non-gamers to the same proficiency of visual processing as those who played regularly.²⁴ Jeroen Jansz shows that the heavily criticized *Grand Theft Auto* series is praiseworthy and that it can help gamers understand themselves because of the amount of control that players are given. Adolescents who may feel like their lives are outside their control have complete freedom to decide how their player acts, dresses, and treats others. With this freedom, players are able to better understand their feelings and to confront their own identity in a comfortable setting.²⁵

Waddington objects to McCormick's utilitarian argument by saying that we do not know the costs, benefits, and the percentage change in the costs of violent games. Thus, there are three uncertain variables making calculation difficult. However, this is not true. We have a very good idea of the benefits of video games. Their economic impact is quantifiable as is the number of hours of entertainment they bring to gamers. *GTA* alone sold over 66 million games by 2008,²⁶ evidence that at least this many people derive entertainment from game violence. Other heavily criticized violent games are likewise usually among the top sellers. There are also a number of educational benefits. The improvements in visual perception, hand-eye coordination, and other motor skills from gaming are also well documented.²⁷ The difficulty only lies in deciding how much these benefits should weigh against any harm that games do, but this is a problem intrinsic to utilitarian theory and

should not be counted against violent games. Nevertheless, we can see whether there are negatives that should enter into the utilitarian calculus and that depends on the kind of research examined in the next section.

The real world effects of violent games

There are three basic empirical questions regarding video game violence. Do they give players the skills to hurt people more effectively? Do they weaken feelings of empathy? Do they motivate players to commit violent acts? Each of these must be answered to assess the moral status of video games, as these are the three most common criticisms found in the gaming literature. The arguments that games do have harmful effects in one or more of these three ways are flawed. They rely on faulty analogies between the virtual world and the real world, misrepresentation of cases in which games may have played a role, and distortion of existent empirical data on the link between games and crime. Scientific studies of video game violence have proved inconclusive. Most suffer from the limitation of not distinguishing the context and type of violence. Moreover, as Ferguson points out, there is good reason to be skeptical of studies purporting to show that there is a connection between gaming and aggression, as these were found to be significantly more prone to publication bias than studies that showed no connection.²⁸

Training killers

One of the most common claims made against violent games is that they have the capacity to train players to commit violent acts. As McCormick explains, if video games lead to violence they do not have to have a direct causal link. Instead, they may have an indirect link of creating violent dispositions or giving players the capacity to follow through with violent desires.²⁹ Many scholars worry that gamers are being trained in how to kill³⁰ and perhaps even how to kill for the military.³¹ This argument is not that video games make players kill, and need not even include the claim that players will be more likely to commit violent acts. The essential point for this criticism is only that games make players more skilled at hurting others. The argument depends on the plausibility of the analogy between actions in a game and the real world. In order for this criticism to work, there must be a high degree of similarity. Galloway describes this reasoning perfectly,

²³ Ferguson (2007a, b), Green and Bavelier (2007).

²⁴ Green.

²⁵ Jansz (2006).

²⁶ Martin (2008).

²⁷ Rosser et al. (2007).

²⁸ Ferguson (2007a, b).

²⁹ McCormick.

³⁰ Grossman and DeGaetano (1999).

³¹ Leonard (2007).

and points out that it depends on an assumed similarity between the actions performed in the game and actions in the real world:

The conventional wisdom on realism in gaming is that, because life today is so computer-mediated, gamers actually benefit from hours of realistic gameplay. The time spent playing games trains the gamer to be close to the machine, to be quick and responsive, to understand interfaces, to be familiar with simulated worlds.³²

This criticism is most common in the popular literature on video games, but even some scholarly critics argue that games are capable of training players to kill. Dave Grossman, a former soldier, is the most widely cited critic making this claim. His argument, that video games teach players how to use weapons, appears as one of the primary claims made against violent games in many studies.³³ Phil Chalmers makes an assertion typical of this line of reasoning: “Lee Boyd Malvo—one of the snipers responsible for the 2002 shootings in the Washington, D.C., area—trained on an Xbox video game called Halo”.³⁴ Similarly, speaking about the Columbine murderer Eric Harris, Gibbs and Roche remark that it is easy to see “how a video-game joystick turned Harris into a better marksman, like a golfer who watches Tiger Woods videos”.³⁵

This argument is weak because there is too little similarity between the acts of violence in games and in the real world to maintain that the mechanics are the same in each. While there are a number of useful computer training simulations, most casual games do not accurately replicate their subject matter. Guitar Hero is a prime example. In these incredibly popular games, players can hold an electronic guitar and push buttons that correspond to notes in a song. The game feels real, but the resemblance is superficial. A master of Guitar Hero will have no easier time learning the guitar than a novice because the simulation is so far removed from the activity. In fact, skill in playing the game may hinder guitar playing ability because the transitioning between the two requires retraining. The same goes for the simulated sports on the Wii. Wii Tennis gives the player the feeling of playing an actual game of tennis because the avatar’s movements are controlled by swinging the Wiimote around as if it were a racket. It is not, however, teaching the player how to swing a tennis racket, nor is it conditioning them for running around the court. Likewise, using a mouse or a gamepad to punch and shoot is far removed from the activity of fighting. As technology

changes there may be some danger of simulations actually teaching players skills they could use to fight. It is certainly possible that in the future first person shooters might have game guns that look and act like real guns and that can actually serve as training tools. Nevertheless, violent games do not yet give the player the skills to actually carry out acts of violence simulated in the game and until they do, we should not overestimate the power of games to train players.

Games may look realistic, but their realism is usually only in the graphics. Alexander Galloway explains that games can be realistic in two different ways.³⁶ There is realism in representing reality and realism in a game’s narrative. To use Galloway’s example, *State of Emergency* is among those violent games created by Rockstar that have been heavily criticized. The plot revolves around anti-corporate riots in which the player gets to destroy government buildings and kill police officers. The game appears highly realistic—destruction is rendered with brutal clarity and there is the freedom to attack others in a number of creative ways. Nevertheless, the game’s realism is superficial. It is, in fact, extremely unrealistic aside from its appearance because the player is engaged in a world of caricatures and commits violent acts that would be impossible in real life. By contrast, games that have realistic narrative need not have sophisticated graphics; their representational power lies on a more substantive connection to the real world. We can take Galloway’s distinction a step further to include realism in simulation. Most games accused of encouraging violence not only have unrealistic narratives, but also unrealistic simulation of the action performed. Until technology becomes more sophisticated and more closely models real actions, it is implausible that games are capable of training killers.

Destroying empathy

Another of the central empirical claims is that exposure to violent video games may erode players’ capacity to feel empathy. Wonderly argues this from the perspective of David Hume’s moral philosophy.³⁷ In contrast with earlier philosophers who tried to base morality on abstract moral precepts or on individual virtue, Hume understood morality as being rooted in natural identification with others’ feelings. Empathy is an intersubjective faculty—our being with others allows us to feel their experiences and we are naturally averse to harming others because of our capacity to empathize with them. If video games destroy our understanding of others, then they will plausibly lead to harmful consequences when seen from a Humean perspective.

³² Galloway (2004).

³³ Gibson (2004), Steven J. Kirsh (2006), James W. Potter (2003).

³⁴ Chalmers (2009) p. 76.

³⁵ Gibbs and Timothy Roche (1999).

³⁶ Galloway.

³⁷ Wonderly (2007).

Wonderly's argument is closely related to the position of other scholars that video games desensitize us to violence and make us less attuned to the suffering of others.³⁸ In contrast to the Kantian and Aristotelian arguments, but like the utilitarian argument against violent games, Wonderly's Humean approach is primarily an empirical problem. It fits into the utilitarian critique as the erosion of empathy is, if it is real, one harm that can be weighed against violent games when calculating their consequences. The critical point in Wonderly's argument is establishing the link between a degradation of empathy and playing violent video games, but she provides surprisingly little evidence to support this. She only references a handful of studies and these are problematic.

For example, Wonderly's first source of support is a study conducted by Mathiak and Weber in which fMRI scans of were taken of players' brains while playing violent video games.³⁹ During play the limbic orbitofrontal area of the brain is inactive. Wonderly considers this significant because it is this region that controls empathy. The study's usefulness is doubtful. There is a clear methodological failing in that it only involves thirteen players—far too few to make a reliable generalization. Aside from this, it jumps to the unwarranted conclusion that deactivating the same part of the brain that controls empathy during play will have a lasting effect on the brain, and that this will translate into changes in behavior. These problems are typical of many studies of desensitization. One study had subjects play either violent or nonviolent video games for twenty minutes then measured their heart rate and galvanic skin response to a ten minute video containing acts of violence.⁴⁰ Researchers concluded that violent video games do desensitize players because those exposed to violent games showed lower heart rates and galvanic skin responses. It assumes that desensitization can be measured by these two scales, that the reduction in them is a significant change to a person's outlook rather than a temporary effect, and, most significantly, the study purports to test the response to real violence, but the "real-life violence" is only a video. At best, the study reveals that violent video games induce temporary changes in subjects' physiological response to violence on television.

Wonderly also cites studies by David Grossman who claims that video games and other violent media are ways of conditioning people to accept violence. Grossman's conclusion that violent media lead to violent behavior is based on dubious empirical and theoretical foundations. His support is the increased rates of violent crimes in the

United States, Western Europe, New Zealand, and Australia between 1957 and 1992. The data does indeed indicate a rise in violence over those years and might lend credence to Grossman's conclusions about violent media during that time, however, video games were hardly violent before 1992. Grossman's statistics for the United States are drawn from the FBI, which reports that there was a dramatic *decrease* in violent crime and crime in general since 1992. In 2008 there were 454.5 violent crimes per 100,000 Americans, down from 757.5 in 1992. Overall crime went from 5,660.2 per 100,000 Americans to 3,667.⁴¹ The numbers indicate a steady and almost uninterrupted downward trend starting around 1992. As Grossman's report was published in 1998, it seems as though he might have taken more recent data into account that would show this change. Crime statistics show that every year video games get more graphic and violent the amount of violent crime decreases significantly. It is doubtful that video games have any effect on crime rate, but does correlate violent gaming with a decrease in crime. The only exception to the trend was a slight rise in juvenile crime in 2005 and 2006, but the numbers have subsided since and continued the downward progression. Law enforcement officials explained the brief surge as an effect of reduced funding for community programs and the release of many gang leaders in major cities; they did not consider video games significant.⁴² The drop in crime is particularly remarkable given poor economic conditions. The US experienced the first recession without a corresponding increase in crime since the 1950s.⁴³ Thus, crime is low even in spite of economic conditions that suggest that it should rise.

Although most studies do conclude that there is some connection between violent video games and actual violence, there are still many that reach the opposite conclusion or even that find that violent games alleviating feelings of hostility.⁴⁴ Durkin argues that violent games decrease violence by providing a safe channel for aggression is particularly interesting as it coincides with Aristotle's thoughts on catharsis. Even many studies that do find some evidence of games increasing aggression show that this is largely dependent on existing aggressive dispositions and, therefore, that games may only aggravate behavior that has its roots elsewhere.⁴⁵ We can also find powerful evidence that there is no link between violent video games and real life violence by looking at the effects of gaming outside the countries that gaming studies usually focus on. Japanese

³⁸ Funk et al. (2003), Bartholow et al. (2006), Carnagey et al. (2007)).

³⁹ Mathiak and Weber (2006).

⁴⁰ Carnagey, Anderson, and Bushman.

⁴¹ Bureau of Justice Statistics (2009).

⁴² Johnson (2006).

⁴³ Ove (2009).

⁴⁴ Durkin and Barber (2002), Fleming and Rick Wood (2001).

⁴⁵ Anderson and Dill (2000).

children are even more avid gamers than those in English speaking countries, yet studies of Japanese gamers find little evidence of behavioral changes. Sakamoto concludes that there may be some harmful effects, but that empirical research on Japanese gamers has not found any.⁴⁶

If we consider Wonderly's empathy hypothesis apart from the research and look only at the theoretical claim, then it is still dubious. Hume gives a convincing account of how humans feel a naturally sympathy with others and how this is the basis of our moral action, yet it is not clear how harm to avatars that look like us can degrade this feeling. Like Waddington, Wonderly puts too much weight on analogy by physical resemblance and this alone is insufficient to show that there is a causal mechanism at work. Indeed, the suggestion that images resembling humans are sufficiently analogous to real humans that harming them can destroy our capacity moral sympathy seems to degrade this powerful moral force. In single-player games, even the most sophisticated NPCs are clearly not human. They do physically resemble real people, but there is usually little about them that is human besides their appearance. The civilians abused on the streets of the *GTA* games are a prime example. These characters bear a resemblance to humans and are made to stand in for them, but they are recognizably hollow. They speak using a few standardized phrases, have no personalities, and have no existence in the game aside from their reaction to the player. For Wonderly's argument to work, we would first need stronger grounds for thinking that players' capacity to distinguish real people from virtual people is such that they would be unable to recognize their in-game actions as having a different moral character than actions that involve real people.

Assessing direct causation

The strongest of the empirical theses—in the sense that it makes the most sweeping claim—is that video games actually lead players to perform violent actions. Proponents of this view argue that they not only give players the skills to carry out their destructive wishes or that they desensitize, but that merely playing a game or seeing it can drive one to reproduce the harmful acts represented in the game. If true, this would be the most worrying of the three hypotheses. It would not only mean that violent games have immense power to undermine social order, it would also be a threat to individual autonomy by compelling gamers to perform actions they would otherwise be averse to. Of the three hypotheses, this one has the least support. Much of the evidence supporting the thesis that games promote violent action is circumstantial—based on isolated cases that ignore contextual factors. Unlike the other two

hypotheses, this one is very difficult to test as it is probably impossible to conduct ethical research on whether a given stimuli actually increases the likelihood of harming others.

A prime example of this position comes from Peter Singer, who uses Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as examples of the potential harm of video game violence. The two played *Doom* at “an impressionable age” and compared the shotgun they used in the shooting to the one in the game.⁴⁷ While he does acknowledge that this does not prove there is a causal relationship, the fact that he relies on this single case study to determine the effects of violent video games suggests that he thinks there is such a relationship. He also thinks that victims and their families seeking damages from criminals who play video games should use this reasoning as the basis for seeking compensation. Singer's argument is based on the premise that in the absence of compelling evidence for either side, we should assume that video games cause violence. Again, the empirical claim is problematic. The argument that video games inspired Harris and Klebold contradicts in-depth studies of the shooting.⁴⁸ The FBI investigation reveals that video games were not a cause of the Columbine shooting⁴⁹; the criminologists and investigators working on the case are certainly in a much better position to understand it than Singer because of their access to information about the murderers.⁵⁰

Some writers understand the promotion of violence in extremely broad terms. Janet Dunlop argues that gender stereotypes in games will not only alter the players' perception of gender but also affect non-players. She thinks that once one child plays a game the effects of that game are transmitted to their contemporaries and that the influence acts as a sort of virus capable of infecting even those who were not directly exposed to the harmful material. All they need is some connection to the contagion in order to have the negative influence of the game take effect. “Therefore, even children who do not play games are indirectly affected by the images of gender that they portray”.⁵¹ This claim is harder to refute than Singer's because there is no case we can examine to judge it, but the lack of

⁴⁷ Singer (2007).

⁴⁸ Langman (2009).

⁴⁹ Kutner and Olson (2008) p. 85.

⁵⁰ Singer's claim draws attention to an important oversight in the studies critical of violent games: the cases that are relied on as examples of game-induced aggression are always given different explanations by law enforcement officials. This is true for Singer's use of the Columbine Shooting, Grossman's discussion of Michael Carneal, and Chalmers' example, Lee Boyd Malvo. In each of these cases video games were not found to be significant. Where there is disagreement, we should favor the explanations of investigators who have the training and access to information to form sound judgments.

⁵¹ Dunlop (2009).

⁴⁶ Sakamoto (2000).

evidence to falsify is not a strength. If Dunlop is correct, then it seems as though we would have many examples of this contagion at work, and we do not. The best indicator of the effect of violent video games is the previously cited data on crime rates. Violent crime has steadily decreased as the popularity of games has gone up. Game developers are constantly pushing the boundaries of realism and violent simulation. Each year there are new titles more graphic than the year before and each year the crime rate drops yet again. Dunlop and others who posit a causal link between video game violence and real violence are unable to explain this fact.

As the preceding sections show, each of the three empirical arguments made against video games are dubious. At most, they are plausible hypotheses that have yet to produce any results sufficiently compelling to support taking real action against violent gaming. The fact that over a decade of research has not produced stronger evidence that video games are immoral, and that there is no positive correlation between gaming and crime, suggests even if there is some connection between violent games and real aggression, the link is very weak. This is essential to bear in mind when considering the potential means of stopping violent gaming. From the utilitarian standpoint we must weigh these weak and uncertain connections against the price that would be paid if some games were censored or banned.

Censorship

Even if each of these empirical hypotheses is correct and violent games do indeed pose these dangers, a utilitarian critique of gaming would also have to show that these faults outweigh the entertainment and economic benefits discussed earlier. Moreover, it must be shown that there are ways of changing games without sacrificing valuable liberties, like the freedom of speech, that are essential to liberal democracy. This would be a very difficult case to make because it is worth sacrificing a great deal to preserve these core values. Despite the costs of censorship, a number of politicians and scholars support regulating violent games or at least certain games that they feel pass the threshold of acceptable content.

In response to Carneal's shooting, Attorney General Ashcroft made a worrying remark: "If I were one to believe that the only solutions were governmental, I might be willing to trade First Amendment rights to improve the culture".⁵² This clearly illustrates the problem. It is not an exaggeration to say that heavy regulation on game content would come at the expense of basic liberties when the

Attorney General himself casts the argument in these terms and proclaims his willingness to revise the constitution rather than allow culture to go unregulated. Peter Singer makes the same point saying that "sometimes we cannot wait for proof. This seems to be one of those cases: The risks are great and outweigh whatever benefits violent video games may have. The evidence may not be conclusive, but it is too strong to be ignored any longer".⁵³ While his point is not cast in terms of a tradeoff between freedom and censorship, he makes essentially the same point as Ashcroft: that there are significant risks associated with video games that justify extreme actions to restrict their content.

If we accept this argument that some violent games should be banned, even at the cost of expressive freedoms, then in order to be consistent we would need to forbid other activities that involve a comparable or greater amount of violence. Competitive sports, for example, would have to be banned as these are far more dangerous than video games. Fights at soccer matches are commonplace around the world, and in the US, there are frequently large riots after championship games in any major sport. In sports like football and hockey, attacking an opponent is accepted and even encouraged. These games make the use physical force against other people part of play, yet we do not consider these sports immoral. Even more worrisome is that there is a much greater incidence of injury and even death for children playing sports than playing video games. It is strange that video games are singled out for such debate while sports that involve real acts of violence are accepted. McCormick is right to point out that "Our moral intuitions that simulating violence in our entertainment predisposes us to real violence are confused and inconsistent with a wide range of other activities that we find morally acceptable".⁵⁴

Thus, the question whether it is permissible to change them even if there is some evidence that they are immoral, should receive an emphatic no. In the US, games are recognized as a form of free speech and have been protected in court; this is how they should be treated elsewhere as well.⁵⁵ The burden of proof in the argument over whether or not violent video games are harmful should go to those who argue that they are; it is they who suggest a radical change to what is considered free speech and who propose eliminating a profitable sector of the economy and a source of enjoyment for millions of gamers. Not only would critics of violent games have to establish that they are unquestionably immoral but they would also need to show that the costs of this immorality would justify the costs of

⁵² Associated Press (2001).

⁵³ Singer.

⁵⁴ McCormick, p. 286.

⁵⁵ Balkin (2004).

expression, and decreased enjoyment should prevent us from taking regulating any content unless there is very strong evidence that it will be harmful. Of course, one may argue that allowing any ultra-violent games, even with age restrictions, makes them accessible to minors. This must enter into the utilitarian judgment, but the illegal sale of violent games to minors should not count as an argument against their existence any more than the sale of alcohol to minors should lead us to accept prohibition.

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Of course, few critics support banning violent games as such. They select particular games or suggest that “ultra-violent” games be censored. The distinction between ‘violent games’ and ‘ultra-violent games’ is misleading. The amount of violence usually depends heavily on how a player chooses to act. There are more and less violent routes through many games and as games increasingly favor the open world model that allows multiple approaches, such essentialist distinctions lose their value. *Fallout 3* is a good example. One can beat the game without killing, relying instead on stealth and persuasion, or one can win by shooting everyone and destroying entire towns. Even games that focus on fighting often include stealth approaches in which one can win by carefully bypassing enemies.

Qualitative studies of particular games further complicate the possibility of censorship. As Sicart correctly points out, “It is possible to describe which values a game may enforce via design, but it is only when the game is experienced that those values can be analyzed, described, and prescribed”⁵⁶ Many of the exemplars of violent gaming are less violent than critics present them or can be played in more or less violent ways. Some also present players’ destructive actions in a satirical context that does not encourage emulation. The *GTA* series is singled out as one of the worst offenders, but ethnographic studies have shown that one can play these with relatively little violence. One player spent 90 min playing *GTA 4* and only killed two people—a much lower number than one might expect based on criticisms of the game.⁵⁷ The game also places violent actions in a context that is a deliberate parody of the real world.⁵⁸ It draws attention to the fact that the player is in a fantasy and that the protagonist’s actions are not examples to follow. This kind of qualitative research is absolutely essential in judging the morality of video games and studies that achieve this depth tend to make fairer judgments.

This is not to say that impermissible to regulate the sale of some games to children. It is probable that at a certain age video games really can be harmful. We must only be skeptical of those to seek to set limits on what kinds of virtual entertainment adults can have. When it comes to banning or censoring certain games sold to those of legal age, the potential costs in lost revenue, restriction of

expression, and decreased enjoyment should prevent us from taking regulating any content unless there is very strong evidence that it will be harmful. Of course, one may argue that allowing any ultra-violent games, even with age restrictions, makes them accessible to minors. This must enter into the utilitarian judgment, but the illegal sale of violent games to minors should not count as an argument against their existence any more than the sale of alcohol to minors should lead us to accept prohibition.

Conclusion

Each of the three major approaches to moral philosophy, Kantian deontological ethics, Aristotelian virtue ethics, and utilitarianism, can defend violent video games. The Kantian need only look at the way that players treat each other in the game world and, so long as they treat other human players with respect, there is no clear harm of playing. While it is true that interactions between players often involve flaming and other signs of disrespect, these are violations of Kantian ethics that are not directly linked to any particular game content and therefore not linked to game violence. From the Aristotelian perspective, the focus must likewise be on what happens in the digital world and what kinds of virtues or vices players are trained to emulate. From a utilitarian standpoint, we can see that many claims about the negative consequences of gaming are dubious and that there are many empirical verifiable benefits that should outweigh the unsubstantiated defects. Of the three, the utilitarian approach is the most difficult to examine as we can only conclusively establish the morality of violent games on utilitarian grounds once we understand all of the consequences of playing them. As the evidence currently stands, there is no compelling reason to oppose violent games on utilitarian grounds. This does not mean that there are no consequences of playing these games, only that the amount of harm does not outweigh the value they have to entertain, create jobs, and generate wealth. Even more importantly, the amount of damage that violent games may do does not justify the restraints of free expression that would be necessary to censor them. Censorship would impose a cost that must be part of a consequentialist moral calculation.

The debate over the moral status of video games is certainly far from over, but it needs to evolve and learn from some of the shortcomings of previous studies. For philosophical studies, this means that more specific attention should be directed at actions in the digital world. Thus far, theoretical studies, including this one, have focused more on the empirical consequences of gaming, rather than paying close attention to how gamers actually experience the games and how they act toward others in the digital

⁵⁶ Sicart, p. 111.

⁵⁷ Hourigan (2008).

⁵⁸ Miller (2008).

world. The empirical side of the debate is likewise an open and this is as it should be—video games are a rapidly changing medium. Many past arguments are rendered anachronistic with each technological advance. Nevertheless, even if new studies do establish a link between video game violence and real-world destructive actions, or games become so sophisticated that they can actually train players to harm other people, we must judge these new developments within the larger context of how the games are played outside laboratory settings and the numerous benefits of gaming.

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