Is it wrong to play violent video games?

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Abstract. Many people have a strong intuition that there is something morally objectionable about playing violent video games, particularly with increases in the number of people who are playing them and the games' alleged contribution to some highly publicized crimes. In this paper, I use the framework of utilitarian, deontological, and virtue ethical theories to analyze the possibility that there might be some philosophical foundation for these intuitions. I raise the broader question of whether or not participating in authentic simulations of immoral acts in general is wrong. I argue that neither the utilitarian, nor the Kantian has substantial objections to violent game playing, although they offer some important insights into playing games in general and what it is morally to be a "good sport." The Aristotelian, however, has a plausible and intuitive way to protest participation in authentic simulations of violent acts in terms of character: engaging in simulated immoral acts erodes one's character and makes it more difficult for one to live a fulfilled eudaimonic life.

Introduction

Recent developments have increased many people's concerns about violent computer games. With the surge in sales of affordable home computers that have greater processing power and improved graphic performance, a growing number of people are playing computer games. Over half of U.S. homes now have personal computers, and that number is rapidly rising.[1] Computer game sales and sales of video game consoles like the Sony Playstation 2 and Dreamcast system have skyrocketed. Along with this increase in the number of people playing games there have been improvements in the graphic quality, sophistication, and creativity of the games themselves.

One segment of the game market has always been devoted to violent games in which the player pits him or herself in battle against other players, monsters, or characters. Enabled by rapidly improving technology, the game makers have made some of these games more and more graphic in their portrayals of torture, assault, murder, and other acts of violence. Whereas shooting an opponent from a distance would have once resulted only in the collapse of his or her body, now the shot is accompanied by screams of pain, realistic writhing, blood, specific damage to a part of the body, flying body parts, and death. Players are equipped with mines, grenades, plasma guns, machine guns, rail guns, sniper rifles, flame throwers,

energy weapons to accomplish these ends, with each weapon inflicting its own characteristic kind of graphic damage. Players have clamored for faster paced games and more powerful weapons, so that as a result not only have the kills gotten more graphic but they are more numerous as well.

With the increase in the number of people playing these games and the graphicness of game violence, it is not surprising that some people have expressed concerns that there is something morally objectionable about playing violent video games. They reason that the exposure to so much simulated violence and death desensitizes the player to real violence and death. Many people believe that being exposed to and perpetrating so much simulated violence will make it easier to commit real violence. Violent video games are frequently mentioned, sometimes in the same breath, with news reports or discussions about mass murders, particularly those committed by high school students. It is not difficult to feel some sympathy with the critics' point. It is hard to imagine how a person can frequently participate in brutal, graphic, and realistic acts of simulated violence and not be affected in some morally relevant sense. Studies of children have shown that they are less likely to seek adult help concerning real-life violence and they will witness a higher level of real-life violence after viewing violence on television.[2] Among adults, physiological responses to real

[1] Jones Thompson, Maryann. "Half of U.S. Homes Now Have PCs ZD InfoBeads Shows Another 6.4 Million American Households Acquired PCs in the Past Year." *The Standard.* http://www.thestandard.com/research/metrics/display/0,2799,9846,00.html

[2] Drabman, R.S. and Thomas, M.H. "Exposure to Filmed Violence and Children's Tolerance of Real-Life Aggression." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 1 (1974): 198–199. "Does Media Violence Increase Children's Toleration of Real-Life Aggression?" *Developmental Psychology* 10 (1974): 418–421.

violence are reduced after viewing violent television.[3] So it seems unlikely that there would be no morally adverse effects to playing games where one is not passive and merely observing violence committed by others, but the player is actually pulling the joystick trigger and inflicting simulated harm him/herself. Common sense dictates that playing such games makes committing real violence easier, however slightly. And common sense also dictates that aside from the harm a person might do to others, playing violent computer games of this sort must have a negative effect on his or her moral character.

On the other side of the debate, one might argue that merely playing a game, however realistic, is not morally objectionable simply because it is fake. Real humans are what matter in the moral assessment of one's actions; real harm happens between real people and in video games there are neither. *Acting* like you are hurting someone is not actually hurting someone. And acting like you are hurting a monster or an idealized representation of a person is even further removed from doing any real harm. Simulating an act that is morally objectionable is not itself morally objectionable, or else we would have to conclude that an actor in a play or movie playing the part of Hitler or a serial killer is also doing something morally objectionable.

So the questions before us are: is participating in simulated violence, even where there is no victim, itself somehow morally objectionable? Are there any victims? Is there anything wrong with going through the motions of an immoral act, and if so what is it?

For several reasons, the best approach to drawing out the various facets of this issue will be to assess it from the perspective of three of the major moral theories – utilitarianism, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics. While there are a number of standard objections to each, and while there are many other theoretical positions, these three perform an important function for us. First, their different models of moral evaluation make it possible to bring out quickly the broadest range of morally relevant factors and distinctions concerning violent video game and simulated immoral acts. Second, they provide a familiar armature for framing the morally salient features of an unusual and rarely addressed moral issue. And third, they reveal two surprising results that would otherwise be hidden by the strong set of moral intuitions that many of us have that indulging in simulations of harmful and violent acts for entertainment is somehow wrong. The first surprising result is that our moral intuitions are mistaken; a successful argument for the

conclusion that playing violent video games or, more broadly, participating in simulated immoral acts is wrong cannot be based upon the premise that doing so leads to or increases the likelihood that one will do harm to others. The second surprising result of the utilitarian and deontological analyses is that whatever might be wrong with playing violent video games, *it has nothing to do with the impact on people other than the player*. I will argue that neither the utilitarian, nor the Kantian can produce compelling reasons to object to authentic simulations of violence or immoral activity. These sections of the paper show that those moral intuitions that we have 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.

The positive thesis of this article will be that the harm that may occur is best construed as harm to one's character. Aristotle's account of moral virtue and character, which is the classic example of a virtue theory of ethics, will provide the theoretical principles to explain and defend this conclusion.

Since these conclusions will be built upon an analysis based on only these three theories, the argument may be vulnerable to a variety of objections that have been raised against them. A full blown defense of any of these moral theories or their contemporary variations is beyond the scope of this paper. But we will be able to make a great deal of progress in sorting out the complicated elements of the violent video game debate.

The utilitarian response to violent video games

The most common kind of objection to violent video games seems to have utilitarian or consequentialist grounds. When people shake their heads upon hearing the news about the most recent high school shooting rampage and mention the unfortunate influence of violent video games, their objection is that the video games have contributed to the conditions that produced this tragic outcome. That is, many people believe that violent video games make it more likely, even if only by a small amount, that people will commit harmful acts against others. Let us explore the relationship between simulated acts and real acts further.

First, to understand how simulated acts might affect us, we can make this threefold distinction: A **dangerous act** is an act that directly increases the risk of harm to either the person who engages in the act or someone else who is endangered by the actor. So not surprisingly, when someone goes skydiving, she engages in a dangerous act (at least it is more dangerous than many other activities.) And when

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[3] Thomas, M.H. and Drabman, R.S. "Toleration of Real Life Aggression as a Function of Exposure to Televised Violence and Age of Subject." *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 21 (1975): 227–232.

someone drives recklessly on a winding, two lane road at night, that person puts themselves at danger and anyone else in the car or in the oncoming lane.

Let us define a **harmful act** as an act that inflicts some damage on someone, the actor or someone else. Harmful acts may or may not arise from dangerous acts. Playing Russian roulette is a dangerous act, and if the chamber with the bullet aligns with the hammer, it becomes a harmful act as well. Eating a sandwich is not a particularly dangerous act, but if one chokes on it, the act becomes a harmful one.

Risk increasing acts are acts that make a person more likely to commit a dangerous or harmful act. A person who has three martinis at a party and gets in their car and drives home puts others on the road at risk of harm. Getting mildly drunk itself is not particularly dangerous, provided that one does not drink enormous amounts and that the health risks of doing it only rarely are negligible, nor does the act of getting drunk itself directly endanger others. But getting drunk does make it more likely that when you do other things, harm or danger will result. In fact, even having a single glass of wine at dinner is an act that increases the risk, if only slightly and indirectly, that one will do harm to someone else.

Now we are in a better position to analyze violent video games and simulated immoral acts from the utilitarian perspective. It should be clear that under normal circumstances, playing a violent video game is not itself a dangerous act. That is, with a few exceptions, the gamer undertakes no more risks by sitting in front of the television or the computer screen than a non-gamer would.

Playing violent video games themselves are not harmful either, as far as we know. While it could turn out that the sort of arousal of playing games or some other fact about them is discovered to cause harm to humans, we do not have any compelling evidence that playing the games itself is more harmful than watching television or operating a computer. Gamers may complain of carpal tunnel syndrome, or blistered fingers from playing too much, but these are not the sort of harms that people are most concerned with in game playing.

The worry or complaint that many people have about participating in authentic simulations of immoral acts, or playing violent video games, is that doing so is a risk increasing act. To say that violent video games play a causal role in some real acts of violence is to say at least that by playing them a person increases the likelihood that they will commit violence or do harm to themselves or others. And while not all risk increasing acts are morally objectionable (driving a car, we are told, increases one's risks more than flying in a plane), some of them, either because they increase the risks

(particularly to others) so much, or because the benefits gained by the addition of risk are outweighed, ought to be avoided.

According to utilitarian theories of ethics, an act is good insofar as it promotes benefit to people overall and it is bad to the extent that it causes harm to people overall. So with the above distinctions in mind, the utilitarian might be able to argue that violent video games are morally objectionable because playing them is unacceptably risk increasing. What can the utilitarian say about anticipated bad consequences in a case like this? Rule utilitarianism and act utilitarianism give different answers. The rule utilitarian need not wait for the results of an act in order to make some determination about its moral status. If it can be established with reasonable certainty that an act of a certain type increases the risk of harm on the whole, even if not every act of that sort actually results in harm, and that risk is not outweighed by overall benefits, then the utilitarian can be critical of that act proportional to the amount of risk increase. So to keep the cases simple, the utilitarian can condemn a game of Russian roulette, even if the players manage to play without getting the chamber with the bullet.

The act utilitarian has some more latitude in determining whether or not individual acts are morally objectionable. Whereas the rule utilitarian might have decided that, in general, acts of a certain type rarely generate enough overall benefit to make them acceptable, the act utilitarian may take individual variations in the situation into account that might make an isolated act acceptable while many others similar to it are not.

Merely increasing the risk of harm cannot be the utilitarian's only consideration, however. If playing the game is a risk increasing act, then it may also turn out that on the whole, they cause more harm to people than good. If empirical studies of game playing reveal that players are more likely to do harm to others *as a result* of playing games, there *might* be utilitarian grounds on which to object to them. I say "might" because it is not enough to point out that an act is risk increasing to show that it is morally objectionable on a utilitarian account. The act has to cause more harm or risk of harm than is warranted by the benefits. There is the additional complication of uncertainty regarding outcomes. The possibility of danger or harm resulting must be weighed against the *likelihood* of benefit that will result. A small increase of risk may be worth a substantial increase in *certain* benefit, but a huge increase in risk may not be worth an unlikely beneficial result. If someone unnecessarily undertakes a risk increasing act with no overall benefit to be gained, or the benefits to be gained do not outweigh the costs, or if the benefits are too unlikely to justify the increase

in risk, then the utilitarian has grounds on which to condemn that act as immoral. For example, there is some risk associated with undergoing surgery due to complications, mistakes, infection, and so on, but if the likelihood that one's life will be saved by the surgery far outweighs the likelihood that one of these unfortunate outcomes will result, then the surgery is an acceptable risk increasing act.[4] And if we discovered that the surgeon recommended unnecessary and very risky procedures in order to scam insurance funds, we would conclude that what the surgeon did was wrong.

Suppose then that the often alleged empirical claim that playing violent video games increases the likelihood that players will commit harm to others is true. Note that the public debate about violent movies, television, and video games has focused largely around a similar issue. But showing that risk is increased by an activity is a far cry from showing that the activity is morally objectionable. Our lives are filled with risk increasing acts that we regularly accept because of the greater benefits to be derived from them. Driving to the grocery store is more risky, all other things being equal, than staying at home, but we consider the advantages of having groceries substantial enough to justify it. So if it is true that violent movies, television, and video games are risk increasing acts, the defenders of television, movies, and games have not lost the debate (at least from the utilitarian perspective). Risk increase is just one factor that goes into the calculation of overall benefit or harm. If the advantages overall still justify that increase in risk, the activities can be defended on utilitarian grounds.

So what does the utilitarian need to support the stronger claim that playing the games is morally objectionable? The utilitarian needs to demonstrate that the increased risk of harm resulting from playing outweighs the benefits derived from playing. Attempts

to clearly articulate all of the relevant factors in such a cost/benefit analysis are notoriously difficult, but we can raise a few decisive considerations. There are millions of people playing violent video games with the numbers growing every year. These people are playing the games for a reason. One of the first things players will point out in these discussions is that the games are *fun*. The recreational and entertainment value of playing is very high to players. Furthermore, the money that the players spend on the games and on computer equipment is helping to fuel a huge expansion in technology that has and will continue to have a variety of other benefits. Airlines, police departments, and the military are all using video game technology to train and become proficient at tasks that are too risky to practice otherwise. (Of course, someone might well argue that military proficiency derived from video game technology should be considered a cost rather than a benefit given its results.) So 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.

The video game player might even respond that these justifications for the value of the games are not needed. Consider the high risks associated with playing football, a sport that is clearly much more popular and much more harmful, dangerous, and risk increasing than video games. Injury and even death results from playing football on the professional, amateur, collegiate, and recreational level on a surprisingly regular basis. These risks are gladly accepted by the players (and the fans) in exchange for what is to be gained by playing. But the players are not the only ones at risk. Riots, fights, assaults, and other violence between fans have become so commonplace in football stadiums that San Francisco Giants games require over 150 police to maintain order. British soccer matches, to point out another example, are notorious for erupting into huge riots between fans that result in hundreds of injuries and deaths. On June 19, 2000 after the Lakers beat the Indiana Pacers in an NBA finals game, hundreds of Laker fans became violent, smashed windows, burned cars, destroyed stores. Rioters destroyed property in 35 different locations. Stuart Fischoff, a professor of media psychology at California State University, Los Angeles said, "It's the level of arousal that is the key factor. Everyone gets caught up in the maelstrom."[5] Notice that these incidents are quite common. They happen every year surrounding our sporting events. But the possibility that there is something morally objectionable about football, soccer, or basketball on those grounds is hardly considered. Typically the response to prevent

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[4] There is an additional complication that should be noted here. By most people's reckoning, the acceptable threshold for amount of risk that one can increase to oneself is different from the threshold for the amount of risk one can increase for others. I can choose to go rock climbing or hang gliding myself, but I cannot impose those kinds of increased risks on someone else without their consent.

Furthermore, we believe that there is a moral component to imposing nonconsensual risks on someone else, whereas some would argue that one can do no wrong in voluntarily engaging in activities that increase only the risk to oneself. It would be risk increasing and clearly immoral to point the roulette pistol at someone else's head and pull the trigger. But pointing the pistol at one's own head, while foolish or crazy, is not clearly immoral. I will assume with Kant the position that individuals do have a moral responsibility to *themselves* as well as others. And many people who are concerned about the moral status of violent video games are worried about the moral impact on both the players and those around them.

[5] *Sacramento Bee*, Wednesday, June 21, 2000.

the violence is to increase security and try to deter people from acting on the impulses that are stimulated by the sports events rather than object to or ban the games.

It should be clear that the harm, danger, and risk associated with playing these other sports vastly exceed the risks that are associated with playing violent video games. No video game player ever broke her neck playing Quake III, fractured a leg when Laura Croft jumped off a large building, or ended up in a wheel chair after a virtual high speed car wreck. Nor is any spectator, watching a video game player from the couch in front of the television, in danger of being crushed in a riot, beaten up by fans from the opposing side, or victimized by looting and fires. While children may get in a fight over who gets to play the Nintendo game next, neither they nor anyone who is watching their game faces the risk, harm, or danger associated with many sporting events.

Now we are in a position to summarize the utilitarian's approach to the violent video game issue. It does not appear that the utilitarian can or will have any substantial grounds on which to morally criticize playing violent video games. They are faced by two substantial hurdles. First, the utilitarian needs to demonstrate that violent video games are risk increasing activities. Carefully controlled empirical studies can identify the causal link, if there is one, between playing the games and doing harm to oneself or others. These studies should also reveal important facts about how much playing is connected with how much harm or tendency to do harm. Second, if utilitarians wish to argue that violent video games are morally objectionable with the results of these studies in hand, they need to *also* argue that the overall increased likelihood to do harm outweighs the benefits derived from the activity. And it is this second hurdle that I believe the utilitarian will have the most trouble getting over. In general, our society's threshold for acceptable risk is very high for recreational activities. With little more justification than fun or entertainment, we skydive, hang glide, scuba dive, rock climb, play/watch football, backpack, bungee jump, and so on, despite the fact that there are rather substantial risks of harm to oneself and others associated with these activities. At the very least, gamers are having a great deal of fun playing violent games, so the utilitarians who would object to them will have to rethink their attitude towards many of our risky activities, or argue that violent video games are significantly different in kind. I have doubts, as do many gamers, that the first claim is true, but empirical studies of the issue may prove me wrong. I have even stronger doubts that the critic of violent video games will succeed in surmounting this second hurdle. Given that

our threshold for acceptable risk is so high in our other forms of recreation, it seems absurd to suggest that violent video games generate harm that surpasses it.

So far, the sort of utilitarian analysis we have considered has been a fairly straight-forward cost, benefit, and risk assessment. The view we have considered is rather like Jeremy Bentham's that pains and pleasures, with some calculating and translating, can be compared and summed directly. But it should be pointed out that the utilitarian position and their objection to violent video games may not be as simple as this. John Stuart Mill is famous for diverging from Bentham on just this point about the comparison of pleasures. According to Mill, there are different, higher and lower, capacities for pleasure and pain, and that there are some higher pleasures and capacities that are more valuable than the lower ones. Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures gives the utilitarian another possible objection to violent video games. According to Mill, the ability to experience pleasure and pain is commensurate with intellectual sophistication and the kind of capacities one possesses. So a human's pleasure and pain are not the same as those of a fish. Furthermore, these capacities in humans can be lost or refined and developed, depending upon the sort of treatment a person gets. As a result, Mill remarks that the,

> capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favorable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise.[6]

We can anticipate, therefore, that the utilitarian might take up Mill's distinction and argue that video games, because the wanton destruction, lawlessness, and violence appeal to our lesser, base impulses, could cause a person's capacities for higher pleasures and goods to atrophy. But this objection is weakened by the rejoinder we considered earlier. At best, this sort of objection is arguing for moderation, balance, and an equal development of human talents. If we take it as a blanket condemnation of the so-called lesser pleasures, video games are just one of a long list of activities that we will be forced to avoid. And as we said before, a plausible moral theory should include reasonable accommodations of sports, games, and recreation.

6 Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 58.

The Kantian's response to violent video games

What about deontological or Kantian theories of ethics? Can they produce plausible reasons for arguing that playing violent video games is morally objectionable? Deontological theories of ethics judge the rightness of wrongness of acts according to their conformity with duty. Kant gives two characterizations of duty that are relevant to this discussion. The first formulation of Kant's categorical imperative is that you should, "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."[7] Kant also expresses the highest statement of our moral duty in terms of universality: "act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."[8]

The problem with violence against people is easily identifiable with reference to the first statement of the Categorical Imperative. If a person commits unjustified violence against another person, she is failing to treat that person as an end in herself. If we disregard their value as rational and autonomous agents, then we treat them as mere means to an end. And committing violence against someone is possibly the worst way to reduce them to the status of an object or a mere means.

Can the Kantian argue that by playing violent video games we treat people as mere means to an end, thus violating this version of the Categorical Imperative? To answer the question, it should be noted that there are video games that involve other people and there are games that do not. In some video games a player pits herself against automated opponents. The game is programmed to provide monsters, characters, or opponents that the player fights or competes against. In these cases, the person who plays is not treating any other people as mere means to an end because there are no other people involved. We will return to the possibility that an activity could *indirectly* contribute to one's treating others as less than ends in themselves shortly.

A rapidly increasing portion of the video game market is for games that allow play between people. Console games that attach to a television set and allow multiple people to play, or computer games that network different players over the Internet, pit people against people. So there is the potential for violations of one's moral duty to other people as ends in themselves in these cases. What sort of behavior in these games would constitute a violation of one's duty to

others? The example of other types of games we play sheds some light on the Kantian case as it did with utilitarianism. The Kantian argument gives us a way to identify a phenomena that we are all familiar with, the person who is a *bad sport*.

A person who wins a game is a bad sport when she gloats, or demeans or insults her opponents, or when she is otherwise disrespectful. A person who loses a fair game is a bad sport when she is resentful of the winners for the loss, angry or bitter at the winners, reluctant to give due credit or respect to the winners, or is otherwise demeaning.

The version of the categorical imperative under consideration gives us a convenient way to identify what is wrong with being a bad sport. The extent to which we fail to respect others, whether in a game or not, as autonomous persons like ourselves who are striving to achieve their goals is the extent to which we violate the categorical imperative. Part of Kant's point in the categorical imperative is to emphasize that being moral is about recognizing that other people are like you, and that we should remember to put ourselves in "their shoes" in our interactions with them. The bad sport is too self-focused, wallowing in self-pity over a loss, or gloating in arrogance over a win, and refuses to consider the opponent's perspective. Being a bad sport is wrong for Kant because it is being disrespectful of one's opponents as ends in themselves.

When we play violent video games with other people, we cannot do any real physical harm to them, despite the heavy plasma blaster firepower we might bring down on their game character. But we can be bad sports towards them. We can demean them with our actions, we can be disrespectful of their humanity, and we can treat them as mere means to our own selfish ends (winning). And while being a bad sport is not a very serious moral crime for Kant (it is not murder, after all), he would say that one should strive to be a good sport. When you are a bad sport, you treat your opponent as a mere object and you cease to see them as persons or as an end in themselves. The problem here is not confined to playing violent video games. We can be a bad sport over cards, football, arm wrestling, dominoes, and so on.

Do violent video games deserve special consideration on these grounds? Playing video games over the Internet does have a peculiar problem. As anyone who has sent or been the recipient of a hostile, rude, or demeaning email, the faceless anonymity of the Internet makes it easier to disrespect people's value as humans. We are all prone to say or do things to people over the Internet that we would never consider saying or doing to them in person. It is not uncommon for violent video game players on the Internet to exchange demeaning, insulting, and disrespectful comments to

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[7] Kant, Immanuel. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. Lewis White Beck (MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, 1987). *Akademie*, p. 429.

[8] Ibid., *Akademie*, p. 422.

each other. And all too often, these comments have a nasty sexist or anti-homosexual ring to them, making the connotations even uglier. Blasting someone into bloody pieces with a rocket launcher and then typing, "Die, bitch!!" or "Down on your knees, cocksucker!" is troubling to the Kantian on several levels, and for good reason.

The general connections between violence and many of our games deserves comment from Kantian grounds. While violent video games make a game out of simulated acts of violence, connecting violence with playing a game is not unique to them. Many of the games that humans play make sport of doing harm. We fence, do martial arts, wrestle, play paint ball and laser tag, and have boxing matches. The language of warfare and violence permeates our descriptions of football, rugby, and even chess. We "conquer the opponent," "crush their defense," "invade their territory," "cripple them," "smash them," and "kill them." What does the Kantian, who condemns violence as treating people as mere means, have to say about these violent aspects of the games we play? It would be unreasonable for a moral theory to condemn game playing outright on these grounds, and uncharitable to read Kant as doing so. At the very least, we should accept a recommendation from Kant that should not be confined to violent video games: people are valuable, and their rights and autonomy ought to be respected. We should take special care in our activities, including our recreation, to esteem their personhood.

Utilitarians, we have seen, are not just concerned with acts that are directly harmful, but also with acts that increase the risk of harm or danger. There are some parallel concerns for the Kantian who is not only worried about direct violations of one's duty, but also acts that increase the risk that one will violate one's duties. In the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant raises just such a concern about our treatment of animals. As far as animals are concerned, he says, "we have no direct duties"[9] because they are not self-conscious and they are merely means to an end. But it does not follow that any treatment of them is acceptable; we still have an indirect duty to other humans through the animals. Kant recognizes that the right kinds of behavior and the disposition to do one's duty must be cultivated. We are to be kind and we should not mistreat animals because being cruel would make us more likely to violate our duty to humans. He says, "tender feelings towards dumb animals develop humane feelings towards mankind."[10] Cruelty, if allowed in our lives, will grow and worsen, whether it be directed at

animals or humans. So we must be vigilant against it.

We can see the application of similar reasoning to the violent video game case for Kant. We have an indirect duty to animals because our dealings with them puts us at greater risk for directly violating our duty to humans. The Kantian might well argue that since it is people we are playing the games against, we are increasing our risk of violating our duty to them. Cultivating cruelty and indifference with regard to virtual suffering and death encourages the same towards real suffering and death, we can imagine Kant saying.

Despite the plausibility of Kant's analysis here, we should consider a difficulty. In the case of animals, Kant has taken it as obvious that cruelty to animals will spill over onto our treatment of humans. Indeed, he treats it as a widely known fact, noting that in England, "butchers and doctors do not sit on a jury because they are accustomed to the sight of death and hardened."[11] The video gamer might well respond at this point by arguing that it is far from obvious that pulling the joystick trigger similarly makes it easier to pull the real trigger. Playing a game, whether on the computer or on the rugby field, is not the same as real life. And beating your opponent, the gamer continues, is different morally and metaphysically from indulging in real cruelty on real animals. Far from disrespecting and dehumanizing each other, participants in many of the most violent sports like boxing, wrestling, and football often have the utmost respect and admiration for each other and each other's accomplishments.

Now reconsider the cases of risk, danger, and harm in sports that we considered from the utilitarian perspective. Kant's analysis is not with costs and benefits *simplicitur* but with engaging in activities that could make it more likely that one would violate one's duty. So if you go to a soccer match and choose to sit in a section of particularly rowdy, empassioned fans, knowing that you are prone to get overly excited yourself and you find yourself participating in a riot against the opposing fans, the Kantian might justifiably object to your going to the game. And if it is possible for you to engage in the act without diminishing your commitment to your moral duty, by not going to the game, sitting in a different section, or staying calm, for example, then the Kantian may be satisfied.

But the argument by analogy from Kant's statement of our indirect duty to animals to the case of violent video games should not be accepted without reservation. 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

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[9] Kant, Immanuel. *Lectures on Ethics*. Trans. Louis Infield (Hackett Publishing Company, 1963, Indianapolis), p. 240.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

be settled with a careful study of what game players and non-game players are prone to do. 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. Kant recognizes that some activities have a value that outweighs their negative side effects. Surgeons are obviously necessary in society, and Kant allows that the perhaps less vital role of butcher is morally acceptable (we could all be vegetarians, after all), as long as we are aware of the problems associated with the occupation.

So we have a number of questions to ask about the Kantian account. First, do activities like being cruel to animals or playing violent video games make it more likely that people will violate their moral duty to others? Second, if some activities do make duty violations more likely, at what point do the negative side effects of the activity justify avoiding or morally condemning the activity? And what I have argued is that playing violent video games will most likely not result in a person's running afoul of these two conditions. If we are too sensitive about the detrimental effects of games on a person's inclination to do her duty, we will be forced to condemn a wide range of activities along with violent video games that most people find morally acceptable. And it would be unreasonable to disregard the benefits that are also derived from many activities that may have a lesser negative impact as well. Furthermore, it does not appear that the Kantian account can say anything that isolates participating in simulations of immoral acts from other activities. What it can offer applies to all game or sport activities and does not capture our sense that there is something differently wrong about going through the motions of an immoral act.

The problem remains

At this point, the critic of violent video games might still complain that whatever it is that is morally objectionable about playing them has not been adequately addressed. We have seen that the utilitarian cannot provide much support for the belief that we may have that there is something wrong about the games. And the Kantian response seems to reduce to the recommendation that we should all be good sports when we play games by treating each other with respect and dignity. The utilitarian and the Kantian responses fail to isolate cases of participating in simulated immoral acts, and their responses are in terms of its effect or

treatment of other people. But we have yet to focus our attention on what harm might become of the person that is playing the game. Isn't there something wrong about the activity for the person who is doing it?

A revised hypothetical example can help to bring out what might be bothering us about simulated acts of violence. Many people are familiar with the holodeck on the Star Trek series. In the holodeck an elaborate computer system is able to holographically simulate any situation for the occupant to experience. Holographic projectors, force field generators, and advanced artificial intelligence programs make a simulation of a beach at sunset or the east end of 19th century London look, feel, smell, and sound like the real thing. The only real persons or things in the holodeck are the human participants. Someone might complain that there are physical and mechanical constraints that would make building such a device physically impossible. But for the purposes of our example, it will suffice that such a device is logically possible. We can see the holodeck is a plausible extension of the improvements in video game technology that are currently allowing more and more realistic participation in computer games. Indeed, the computer manufacturers are striving to build technology that would allow the construction of something like a holodeck, and gamers anxiously await these kinds of technological improvements.

Imagine now that someone runs a program on the holodeck that allows him or her to commit holo-pedophilia with a simulated holo-child. The sophistication of the program and the hardware make it possible for the every aspect of the act to be portrayed in perfectly realistic detail. Similarly, someone could commit holo-genocide, holo-rape, or holo-murder. In these cases most of us have a strong moral intuition that there is something morally objectionable about the act itself, isolated from anything else that might happen outside the holodeck, and even though it is only simulated and no victim gets hurt. But the utilitarian does not seem to be able to object to the act itself without an appeal to some real consequences, perhaps when the person goes on to commit the act on real persons. And the Kantian cannot complain that the holodeck pedophile, murderer, or rapist is being a bad sport or is disrespecting some real persons. The Kantian might make the weaker complaint that engaging in such an activity would make it more likely that a person would go on to violate his or her duties to real humans. But for most of us, what seems wrong with the activity just described is not merely that the person might go on to violate a duty to others or do harm to them. What strikes us about the example is that there seems to be something wrong with the activity without regard to what might happen outside the holodeck at

some other time. And there is something wrong with the act solely with respect to the person who commits it.

The Aristotelian's response to violent video games and holodeck immorality

The Aristotelian version of virtue ethical theory provides us with the vocabulary and explanation of what our gut feeling tells us is wrong with holo-pedophilia, and perhaps by extension, to violent video games. Aristotelian ethics takes a fundamentally different approach to morality than the other theories we have addressed. Utilitarianism and Kantianism have both been more concerned with the performance of acts and their conformity with rules or principles. The utilitarian wants to know what the overall consequences will be; the principle of utility is the only yardstick for morality. The Kantian, is not concerned about the consequences, but she is concerned about the conformity of an activity with the Categorical Imperative. Both theories focus their attention on the acts themselves, and both theories test the acts against a rule of morality.

The Aristotelian takes a broader interest in the character of the person, rather than the implications of an act for other people or its conformity with a rule. To borrow Bernard Mayo's phrase, virtue ethics are more interested in "being" than in "doing."[12] Aristotle believes that the question of a person's character is more fundamental and more important than a person's obedience to rules of conduct. He argues that a deep, fulfilled happiness or flourishing (*eudaimonia*) can only be achieved by pursuing the development of the capacities that are the unique function of human beings. Our function, and the traits that set us off from other beings, is our capacity to reason. So we must exercise our reason and govern our behavior with reason in order to achieve happiness.

In addition to possessing the capacity to reason, our lives are characterized by lower functions: we possess inborn desires, we have sensation, we are capable of movement, we need nourishment, we grow, and we seek to reproduce. We share some of these traits with plants and some of these traits with animals. In order for our rational nature to function properly, it must infuse, direct, and govern these other lower functions. Aristotle argues that reason will guide us on a moderated path between extreme behaviors and activities. When reason plays its appropriate role, we exhibit virtue. Reason guides us to the virtue of courage

between the extremes of cowardice and recklessness. The virtue between the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain is temperance.

Building a virtuous character does not come easily or quickly, according to Aristotle. It is not in our nature to be either virtuous or virtueless, he argues, so we must cultivate these character traits with education and habit. The way to be a good person, on Aristotle's view, is not simply to do the right thing as it is in the other theories. Mere outward conformity with what appears to be the good will not suffice. He says, "the agent must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character."[13] We can only become a right thinking and subsequently right behaving person through training. As a result, what particular choice one makes in a moral situation is not as important in the development of character as being courageous, being wise, or being temperate.

The Aristotelean has a ready answer to the question, what, if anything, is wrong with playing violent video games. By participating in simulations of excessive, indulgent, and wrongful acts, we are cultivating the wrong sort of character. The Aristotelian would respond that the holo-pedophile, or the holo-murderer is re-enforcing virtueless habits and dispositions in themselves. Notice also that the complaint the Aristotelian would make is different than the utilitarian's. The utilitarian might argue that by indulging in holo-crimes, one makes it more like that you will commit real crimes. You lower your inhibitions, desensitize yourself to suffering, and make it easier to do actual harm to real people. We have seen, however, that the utilitarian cannot make this criticism of games without also criticizing a host of other activities like football, fencing, or even chess. But the Aristotelian does not object to holo-crimes on the basis that the activity will lead to other real crimes or harm. The Aristotelian is primarily focused on the character of the person who is participating. By engaging in such activities, you do harm to yourself in that you erode your virtue, and you distance yourself from your goal of eudaimonia. And by focusing its concern solely on the character of the individual, the Aristotelian response gives us the needed isolation to morally assess the activity without invoking its effects on others.

One may complain at this point that the version of virtue ethics under consideration is antiquated. Aristotle's view was more egoistic than ours. Some

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[12] Mayo, Bernard. *Virtue and the Moral Life* (Macmillan Ltd., New York, 1958).

[13] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Richard McKeon (Random House, New York), 1104a, pp. 31–34.

contemporary versions of virtue ethical theories do not focus solely upon the development of character for one's own sake but in order to assure that each of us has decent behavior towards everyone else. Altruism, not just personal *eudaimonia*, should motivate us towards achieving a virtuous moral character.

The difficulty with this alternative account of virtue in addressing violent video games is that it seems to fall back to the question of whether or not such activities actually do contribute negatively to how we interact with others. And the argument from the utilitarian and deontological case can apply here. Given the threshold we currently accept for detrimental effects that sports, games, and recreation have on us and on those around us, it does not appear that a case can be made that violent video games are objectionable on the grounds that they make us indecent or lack altruism with each other. The Aristotelian theory evaluates in egoistic terms and that sort of moral theory may seem selfish to us, but an account that couches the moral analysis soley in terms of harm done to the character of the individual seems to be the only option available to us after the utilitarian and deontological analyses fail.

The general points here about the Aristotelian ethics approach to moral behavior is not a new one. What is new and interesting, I believe, is the way that violent video games make it evident that in some cases there are moral complications with engaging in acts that neither violate any moral duties we have set for ourselves, nor have any measurably bad consequences for other people. It does not appear that violent video games do either to us. But our moral analysis of an activity is not exhausted with those two sets of considerations. I have suggested that in cases like the most violent video games, the moral problem is with its detrimental effect on a person's character, and only an Aristotelian account of moral behavior gives us the vocabulary to describe what seems intuitively wrong about cases like holodeck pedophilia and perhaps some violent video games.

Conclusion

We began this study by trying to identify what it is about participating in authentic, but simulated, immoral acts. Many people have a strong moral intuition that there is something objectionable about playing a game that requires and enables a player to inflict harm on representations of other players. Many of the objections to violent video games have centered around their alleged contribution to people's committing real violence. But we have seen that utilitarian arguments of this sort are actually the weakest objec-

tions that the critic can raise. The challenge of showing that playing violent video games is a causal factor in real violence is substantial. Furthermore, the additional challenge of showing that the (alleged) increased risk outweighs all of the benefits derived from the games will not be met unless our threshold is lowered to point that it similarly condemns a host of other activities that we cherish. Kantians, it would appear, cannot offer us a justification for our suspicions either. They can admonish us to be good sports in our games, and remind us to value and respect other humans, despite the anonymity of the Internet. But it is not evident that respecting people's humanity is made any more difficult by violent video games than it is by a wide range of sport and game activities that we consider to be morally acceptable. And judging by the cruelty to animals case, even Kant refuses to condemn activities on those grounds alone.

So the surprising negative thesis defended in this paper is that if violent video games are morally objectionable, *it is not because of the harm that players do to others, nor is it because of a duty to others that the player has violated*. 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.

The positive thesis of this article is that the harm that may occur is best construed as harm to one's character. A brief account of an Aristotelian account of morality has provided us with a more substantial and intuitive explanation of what we do wrong when we pull the virtual trigger. We re-enforce virtueless habits and make it harder for the individual to reach eudaimonic fulfillment.

I have only considered a handful of important moral theories, and I have not given an exhaustive defense or explanation of any of them. But they have allowed us to roughly sketch out the central morally relevant aspects of the violent video games question, and as a result we are now in a much better position to see the direction that a more thorough argument against them must go.

This study should also make some of the limitations of the classic theories of ethics clear. Humanity is now facing a new set of moral questions brought on by developments in technology. The classic moral theories considered in this study were conceived originally to address a different, somewhat simpler set of issues. Now, with the development of more realistic and convincing forms of simulation, we find it possible to have an impact on the lives of others at a greater distance and with greater anonymity than ever before. And we find that the technology itself is capable of having morally significant effects

on us when we use it. In the case of violent video games, technology has created a buffer that alters the character of interactions that humans could have only had face to face before. From my computer terminal, I can guide my game alter-ego to do and say things that I would never think of doing in real life. When the gulf between us and our representative in a game is wide, such as the gap between me and a chess piece that wages war on my behalf in a chess game, we have little difficulty separating reality from simulation. But when we look through our game character's eyes, and that character acts and talks like a human (or a superhuman), and that character interacts with what appear to be other humans, we are confronted with the visceral and organic fact of our own involvment in an activity that feels remarkably like the real thing. And the holodeck example shows that as technology improves, it is plausible to argue that the extent of the moral influence of the game character and game activities will increase. Moral theories have typically been devised to address what once would have been a twofold interaction between persons. The growth of technology will increase the need for us to work out the details of a new fourfold moral dynamic that includes not just how people's actions affect each other, but how the interactions between my game representative and my opponent's game representative affect me and my opponent.