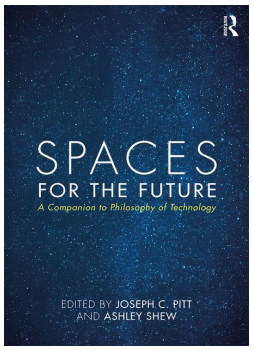

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Video Games and Ethics

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Chapter 3

Video Games and Ethics

Monique Wonderly

In 2012, the global video game market was valued at approximately 79 billion dollars, and according to some estimates, its value is expected to exceed 110 billion dollars by the end of 2015 (Gartner 2013). In the United States alone, more than 155 million people play video games, and more than half of all U.S. households own a dedicated gaming console (ESA 2015). Video games constitute one of the most thriving, pervasive, and popular forms of media in the world.

The mass appeal of video games doubtless has been fueled by impressive advances in computer and console gaming technologies—including accelerated graphics, motion-sensitive control devices, and the sophisticated design of expansive 'open' game worlds. Players are increasingly afforded richer, more realistic options for exploring and interacting with their virtual environments. Yet, while these features may make video games more enjoyable, they also make certain questions concerning the *ethics* of playing video games more salient. For example, consider the player who repeatedly thrusts the controller forward in order to simulate the stabbing murder of a computer-controlled human character who appears to scream, bleed, and writhe in pain. Some would deem the player's actions in this scenario morally wrong, while others would insist that they have done nothing at all ethically objectionable.[1]

At first glance, it is unclear whether and how there can be anything morally significant about video game play that does not directly involve other human beings. The player in our hypothetical example isn't engaging with any other *actual* people. On what grounds, then, might their actions be morally problematic? This question has generated a great deal of debate among theorists who've engaged with the topic. In what follows, I present and critically analyze key aspects of this debate. Following the trend in the relevant literature, I focus on the moral status of playing games that are thought to feature excessive or loathsome violence, including sexual violence.

Morally Controversial Video Games

Over the past forty years, a number of video games have engendered controversy because their content was perceived as excessively violent or otherwise offensive. In 1982, Mystique released a game for the Atari 2600 console called *Custer's Revenge*, the object of which is to have sex with a bound Native American woman. Though the game's designer denied the accusation, many have denounced the game for depicting rape (Ocala Star-Banner 1982). Two games that explicitly permit virtual rape include Illusion's PC titles, *Battle Raper: Hyper Realaction* (2002) and *RapeLay* (2006). Unsurprisingly, despite being marketed as 'adult-themed' games, all three elicited moral outrage from the general public (Peckham 2010).

While relatively few mainstream video games permit sexual interaction between characters and fewer still permit sexual *violence*, violence in other forms has long been a staple of the video game genre. In 1976, the Exidy arcade game, *Death Race*, in which the object is to earn points by using a small vehicle to run down stick figures, drew national attention in the United States, with some critics characterizing the game as "gross," "sick," and "morbid" (Young 1976). Twenty years later, controversy arose around two other games featuring vehicular violence: *Carmageddon* (Interplay 1997) and *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA Design/Rockstar North 1997). Both games rewarded players for running over pedestrians and smashing into other vehicles. The *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) series gained further notoriety when the public got wind of a popular strategy among players of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (Rockstar North 2002). Players could restore their health by paying to have sex with a prostitute whom they could then kill directly after sex in order to take back the funds that they spent on her services.

Grand Theft Auto V (Rockstar North 2013) also permits the virtual murder of prostitutes—and that of many other nonthreatening game characters besides—but what many have deemed more disturbing is that a particular mission *requires* the player's character to engage in torture. As investigative journalist Simon Parkin explains,

> the "24"-esque scene, which requires players to rotate the game controller's sticks in order to tug out the victim's teeth with pliers, has inspired debate—not only over its artistic merit but also over whether such distressing interactions have any place in video games.
>
> (Parkin 2013)

The GTA games are generally considered *ultra-violent* video games, a category intended to pick out games that feature graphic depictions of cruelty and repetitive loathsome violence toward human beings (Standler 2007; Media Coalition 2007). A prime exemplar of ultra-violent video games is Rockstar Games' 2003 release, *Manhunt*.

In *Manhunt*, the main character is forced to work for a snuff film maker who demands the grisly murder of victims using weapons ranging from hammers to plastic bags. The game's sequel, *Manhunt 2*, appeared on the market in 2007, shortly after the release of Nintendo's Wii console system. Gamespot staff reviewers explained how the Wii's motion-sensitive remote impacted game play:

> The big hook to the action is the way the controller is used during the various kills. You'll now have to actively follow onscreen motions that approximate your actions. Throwing a chair? Hold the Wii Remote and analog stick as if you've got the chair in your hands and move it accordingly. Stabbing someone? Jab that Wii Remote.
>
> (Cocker and Torres 2007)

Both games have been widely criticized for morally objectionable content, and each has been banned in certain venues (BBC News 2014).

Thus far, we have established that video games with content perceived as excessively violent are prone to public protest and moral criticism. What we have not yet established is whether (and if so, why) such protest and moral criticism might be *justified*. The fact that many people find these games offensive is not enough. Even the most heinous act of violence, if performed by a player character in a game world, cannot directly injure any actual human beings. What, then, is the moral harm in playing video games that enable players to simulate acts of murder, rape, or torture against mere computer-controlled characters?

Let's consider how ethicists have attempted to address this important question.

Approaches to Assessing the Moral Significance of Playing Violent Games

Behavioral Effects of Violent Video Games

One way to vindicate the claim that violent video games are morally problematic would be to show that playing such games impacts one's moral behavior outside of the gaming environment. Some have suspected that playing violent video games can cause one to violate one's moral duties and/or to behave violently toward others. Let's begin with the former possibility, that video games can cause one to violate one's moral duties. Though presumably, we have no moral duties to virtual characters, we do have certain moral obligations to our fellow human beings and (according to some ethicists) to ourselves. If playing excessively violent video games violates—or makes it significantly more difficult to satisfy—such obligations, then we have a *prima facie* reason for thinking that playing those sorts of games is ethically objectionable.

Eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant famously argued that as human beings, we have a moral duty to act so as to respect ourselves and other rational agents (Kant 1997a: 38). As such, we should avoid performing actions that might constitute, or cause, the degradation of our own persons or the disrespect of other autonomous, rational beings. Some theorists have suggested that a Kantian argument can be used to elucidate a moral problem with playing violent video games. David Waddington identifies two "Kantian grounds" on which playing a violent game might be deemed morally problematic. First, when people indulge in a violent video game, they might debase themselves by "acting cruelly." Second, insofar as video game characters are analogs to human beings, failing to treat them with respect might make us less likely to perform our duties to actual people (Waddington 2007: 125). Let's consider each point in turn.

As Waddington explains, Kant considered certain vices, such as lying and avarice, violations of one's duties to oneself, and he would likely regard behaving "cruelly" in a similar vein (Waddington 2007: 124). Of course, it isn't entirely clear that one can behave cruelly in the context of playing a video game that does not involve other sentient beings. Waddington himself acknowledges that this suggestion is a contentious one, and Marcus Schulzke outright rejects it. According to Schulzke, "there is nothing worthy of being called 'cruelty' in video games because the characters are not capable of feeling pain or suffering" (2010: 128). To my mind, Schulzke's conclusion is a bit hasty. It might be possible to behave cruelly even where one knows that one's actions will not cause suffering—e.g., where one revels in causing representations of cruelty for cruelty's sake—but let's set aside this possibility for a moment, and consider another. Even if players do not *behave cruelly* when engaging in video game violence, perhaps they debase themselves in other ways.

For example, one might argue that while indulging in violent video games is not strictly speaking *cruel*, it degrades oneself insofar as it prevents one from engaging in more productive, morally worthwhile activities. This would be especially problematic given that many who play video games (violent or otherwise) tend to invest excessive amounts of time in the activity—often to the point of pathology. Pathological video game play—and indeed, video game *addiction*—is a growing problem in some countries (Chiu et al. 2004; Anderson and Warburton 2012). Notably, there are many cases of players becoming so immersed in video games that they jeopardize their education, their jobs, and even their personal relationships (Whatcott 2011; Brey 2008). There are also cases of players who—refusing to break for self-care—become dangerously dehydrated, starved, and exhausted while playing video games, sometimes leading to death (Hunt and Ng 2015).

Importantly, though, while this extreme brand of self-neglect would surely be morally problematic by Kantian standards, the majority of persons who play violent video games do so while maintaining careers and relationships, and many regard their gaming time as a *form* of self-care rather than a diversion from it. The fact that a small minority of gamers pathologically overindulge in violent video games gives us little reason to think that playing violent video games is inherently self-debasing.

Even if playing violent video games does not violate duties to oneself, one might suggest that playing such games makes it more difficult to satisfy duties to others. The second Kantian argument that Waddington appeals to suggests this possibility. In his *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant explained that while we have no duties to nonhuman animals, we should take care in how we treat them as "he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealing with men" (Kant 1997b: 212). According to Waddington, if animals can be considered an analog of humanity, then perhaps virtual characters can as well, and so behaving maliciously or otherwise disrespectfully toward virtual characters might incline us toward mistreating actual persons (Waddington 2007: 125).

One criticism of this approach is that it assumes a dubious analogy between our relationship to nonhuman animals and our relationship to virtual human characters. Insofar as Kant's argument is plausible, it may be because human beings and nonhuman animals are both living, sentient creatures. Behaving cruelly toward sentient nonhuman creatures might plausibly incline one toward mistreating persons. Of course, virtual characters are not sentient creatures, but rather, *representations* of human beings. Schulzke, for example, argues that because virtual characters lack "life and autonomy," they are akin to photographs and at best, "superficial analogs" to humans (Schulzke 2010: 128).

Schulzke's argument here may be suspect. First, as some theorists have noted, virtual human characters may be more realistic analogs to actual human beings than are nonhuman animals (Brey 1999: 9). While virtual characters are *in fact* lifeless entities, players interact with them in the game world as though they are alive. When players act upon virtual characters, those characters appear to respond, and in much the same way that we would expect an actual live human being to do. This, it seems, is part of the fun. In this way, it seems reasonable to think that engagement with virtual human beings could constitute a kind of *practice* for engaging with actual human beings—in much the same way that using flight simulation software to fly a virtual airplane can constitute a kind of practice for flying an actual plane. In any case, acting upon virtual characters is certainly not like acting upon photographs. Our orientations toward virtual characters, and our language about them, suggest as much. Consider, for example, that when a player uses his avatar to strike a computer-controlled human character, we might expect him to say something like, "Did you see what happened when I punched that guy?" If he uttered the same question after punching a photograph, we would think it more than a little odd.

The Kantian suggestion that disrespectful treatment of human analogs might cause one to "become hard in his dealings with men" raises difficult questions. What would it mean to treat virtual characters harshly or disrespectfully? And what exactly constitutes 'hardness' in our dealings with persons? Fortunately, one needn't appeal to Kant—or to the notions of duty or respect—in order to show that playing violent video games can impact one's moral behavior outside the game environment. One might instead simply attempt to show that playing such games causes individuals to behave more violently (or to behave violently more often) in the real world. If a consequence of playing violent video games is an increase in actual violence, then—assuming the benefits of playing such games do not outweigh its costs—there is good reason to think that playing excessively violent video games is morally objectionable.

Can playing violent video games dispose one toward actual violence? Some people certainly seem to think so. There is no shortage of cases in which an outraged public has implicated

violent video games as causal factors in violent crime. After Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot more than thirty people (killing thirteen) in what came to be known as the Columbine High School Massacre, many were quick to point out that the pair regularly played *Doom* a first-person shooter game (Brey 2008: 378). In 2004, a teenager who frequently played *Manhunt* stabbed and bludgeoned another child to death. The victim's parents partially blamed the murder on the game, adducing similarities between his actions and the killing techniques used in *Manhunt* (Thorsen 2004). In 2004 and 2006, attorneys filed suits against Rockstar Games, alleging that *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* contributed to the murderous actions of Devin Moore and Codey Posey respectively (Tuscaloosa News 2006: 4B). Other tragedies for which video games have been blamed include the Virginia Tech Massacre, the Sandy Hook Murders, and the Washington Naval Yard Shootings. Various sources claimed that the perpetrators of these actions all played violent video games (Kain 2013).

Of course, even if the aforementioned young murderers were frequent players of violent video games, this by itself means fairly little. As I argued in an earlier work:

> Incidents in which video game players commit violent acts are no doubt tragic, but appealing to such cases as evidence for the legal or moral culpability of violent video games may be problematic. In the first place, millions of children play violent video games, so it is statistically probable that many juvenile offenders will also be players of violent video games strictly as a matter of chance. Second, in most cases which attempt to link violent video games to teenage violence, there are other common threads which appear to be more causally relevant, such as abuse or depression.
>
> (Wonderly 2008: 4).

More to the point, the vast majority of people who play violent video games do not commit violent crimes, so we should resist the impulse to assume that when players of violent video games commit actual violence, that they necessarily do so *because* of the games.

Psychologists and sociologists have become increasingly interested in determining whether there is a credible link between violent video game play and real-world violence. Some empirical studies have suggested a positive relationship between playing violent video games and violent behavior (Anderson and Dill 2000). Other studies, however, appear to contradict these findings (Ferguson 2007). Recently, the American Psychological Association (APA) assembled a task force to conduct a meta-analysis of the studies available on the topic, and the task force concluded that the there is insufficient evidence to suggest a causal link between violent video game play and violent criminal behavior (APA 2015: 26). Interestingly, however, the APA did confirm a positive causal relationship between violent video game play and aggression. According to the report:

> violent video game use has an effect on aggression. This effect is manifested both as an increase in negative outcomes such as aggressive behavior, cognitions, and affect and as a decrease in positive outcomes such as prosocial behavior, empathy, and sensitivity to aggression.
>
> (APA 2015: 26)

Importantly, not all aggression—or aggressive behavior—translates to actual violence, so the extent to which violent video game play can cause genuinely dangerous behavior remains unclear. What is notable, though, is that even if violent video game play does not directly cause one to behave immorally, the APA analysis provides some evidence that such play can have an undesirable impact on morally significant *attitudes*.

If playing violent video games does in fact negatively impact one's moral (or morally relevant) attitudes, then this also constitutes a reason to think that such play is ethically suspect. In the following section, I review what philosophers, psychologists, and other theorists have had to say on the issue.

Psychological Effects of Violent Video Games

Some theorists have suggested that playing violent video games can be problematic—not necessarily because they directly cause immoral *behaviors*—but rather, because they impact certain of our attitudes in morally pernicious ways. For example, theorists have expressed worries that playing violent video games might cause increases in aggressive cognitions and affect, and decreases in sensitivity to actual violence and empathy.

As noted earlier, a recent APA analysis concluded that among the effects of violent video game use are increases in aggressive cognition and aggressive affect. Examples of aggressive cognition included thoughts about the world being a hostile place, dehumanization, and proviolence attitudes (APA 2015: 10). Aggressive affect was marked by increased feelings of hostility—often accompanied by insensitivity to the distress of others (APA 2015: 10–11).

The worry that violent video game exposure can 'desensitize' one to actual violence (or moral atrocity more broadly) has become a prevalent theme in the psychological and philosophical literature on violent video games. Carnagey, Anderson, and Bushman (2007) conducted one of the first studies to experimentally examine the link between violent video game play and physiological desensitization. According to their research, participants who were randomly assigned to play a violent video game, even for just twenty minutes, had relatively lower heart rates and galvanic skin responses while watching footage of real violence than did those randomly assigned to play a nonviolent video game. The research team concluded, "The present experiment demonstrates that violent video game exposure can cause desensitization to real-life violence. . . . It appears that individuals who play violent video games habituate or 'get used to' all the violence and eventually become physiologically numb to it" (Carnagey et al. 2007: 495). Subsequent studies measuring violent video game players' somatic and neural responses to violent stimuli have yielded similar results (see, for example, Arriaga, Monteiro, and Esteves 2011; Engelhardt et al. 2011).

Interestingly, reports of military personnel also provide some support for the idea that violent video games can be used to desensitize individuals to actual violence. Lieutenant Colonel David Grossman notes that the U.S. military employs violent video games to train soldiers. According to Grossman, there is a natural aversion to killing one's own kind, so troops must be desensitized and conditioned in order to become willing and proficient killers (Grossman 1998). There are also first-person reports from soldiers in the field who've indicated that violent video game play helped make it psychologically easier to fire on enemies. Sergeant Sinque Swales recounts one of the first times that he shot an enemy: "It felt like I was in a big video game. It didn't even faze me, shooting back. It was just natural instinct. *Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!*" (Vargas 2006). Swales reported being an avid fan of the first-person shooter game *Halo 2* and the military-themed *Full Spectrum Warrior*—a game developed with help from the U.S. Army.

A number of theorists have expressed ethical concerns about the relationship between emotional desensitization and playing violent video games. Thomas Nys, for example, suggests that the "moral fishiness" of playing (some kinds of) violent video games might lie "in their willing desensitization against practices such as rape, murder, or general mischief" (Nys 2010: 85). Waddington expresses a related worry, suggesting that as violent video games increase in verisimilitude, it may become difficult to distinguish between real and simulated transgressions,

and as a result, we would come to "devalue the idea of wrongness" (Waddington 2007: 127). Others have focused on the relationship between violent video game play and reduced empathy.

In an earlier work, I adduced empirical research in support of the view that playing (some forms of) violent video games might damage one's empathic faculties (Mathiak and Weber 2006; Funk et al. 2004; Bartholow et al. 2005). I argued that if playing such games *does* negatively impact one's capacity for empathy, then doing so might not only decrease our emotional reactivity to actual violence—nor merely cause us to devalue the idea of wrongness—but it might contribute to the dissolution of our abilities to make moral judgments in general (Wonderly 2008). This is because, on many accounts, our capacities for empathy play an important role in our abilities to glean moral knowledge and to make moral assessments (e.g., Hume 2005; Smith 2009; Hoffman 2000; Slote 2004).

Some theorists have challenged the view that violent video game play can impact one's morally relevant attitudes in the ways suggested. Schulzke, for example, posits that the arguments put forth by Waddington and Wonderly rely on a dubious analogy between harming virtual characters and harming actual human beings. According to Schulzke, it is unreasonable to suppose that the mere physical resemblance of virtual characters to actual humans is sufficient to damage our abilities to distinguish between real transgressions and simulated ones, or again, to empathize with our fellow human beings (Schulzke 2010: 134). Importantly, though, neither Waddington nor Wonderly argue for this view. While the advent of virtual environments that look (and feel) more realistic would likely exacerbate the potential effects that Waddington and Wonderly point to, one needn't think that the cause of either problem would be *reducible* to mere physical resemblance. Other contributing factors might include, for example, the richness and complexity of interactions available to the player, the frequency with which specific types of virtual actions are repeated, and the in-game consequences of performing the virtual acts in question.

Schulzke is also skeptical about the empirical research that suggests a relationship between violent video game play and reduced empathy and emotional sensitivity. Schulzke argues that studies purporting to show such a relationship are often plagued by methodological flaws and research biases. He also argues that the results of such studies are both prone to misinterpretation and must contend with other research that suggests an opposite conclusion (2010: 133). Philip Brey and Garry Young have expressed similar worries (Brey 2008: 378; Young 2013: 33).

The comprehensive metareview recently conducted by the APA task force might help to assuage some of these concerns. According to its report, the available research demonstrates "a consistent relation" between violent video game use and "heightened aggressive affect" along with "reduced empathy and sensitivity to aggression" (APA 2015: 18, 26). Of course, one must take care in interpreting the results too strongly. They do not conclusively prove that violent video game play elevates aggressive attitudes or reduces empathy or sensitivity to violence. The results are, however, quite suggestive. They indicate that the *best available* empirical evidence on the topic suggests that violent video game use can, and often does, impact morally significant aspects of our psychology in potentially pernicious ways.

If playing violent video games can have this kind of impact on one's psychology, then this would be significant for at least two reasons. First, the psychological effects noted earlier could cause real, if subtle, negative changes in behavior. Recall that while the APA task force concluded that there is insufficient evidence to establish a link between playing violent video games and criminal violence, it is satisfied that playing such games can increase some forms of aggressive behavior (APA 2015: 26). Second, even where such psychological changes do not directly translate into immoral *actions*, increased aggressive affect and cognition and reduced empathy and sensitivity to violence may nonetheless negatively impact one's *character*. This

is important from an ethical standpoint, as morality is concerned not only with what kind of actions we perform, but also with what kind of people we *are*.

Violent Video Games and Character

The normative approach to ethics broadly known as *virtue ethics*, puts the notion of character—rather than action—at the forefront of moral theory. Virtue ethicists tend to focus on the question, "What kind of person should I be?" On some views, one can use elements of virtue ethics to evaluate actions. For example, actions that enhance one's virtue or character might be considered good on that account, whereas actions that inculcate vice and thereby harm one's character might be deemed bad or wrong. Many have advocated adopting a virtue-theoretical framework in order to morally evaluate violent video games (McCormick 2001; Coeckelbergh 2007, 2011; Sicart 2009a; Sicart 2009b).

As Aristotle's theory of virtue is the most popular exemplar of virtue ethics, theorists often draw on an Aristotelian account of character development in order to explain why playing violent video games might be morally problematic. Aristotle posited that the development of virtues—which on his conception, consist in intellectual, emotional, and social *skills*—is central to human flourishing or *eudaimonia*. Ethical virtues, or virtues of character such as temperance, are cultivated through practice (Aristotle 2000; Kraut 2014). Through proper upbringing and repetition of virtuous habits, we develop the sorts of characters that are conducive to human well-being.

Some theorists have argued that playing violent video games is inimical to virtue because in playing such games, players practice and reinforce morally vicious habits. Matthew McCormick, for example, suggests that what we do wrong when we "pull the virtual trigger" is "reinforce virtueless habits and make it harder for the individual to reach eudaimonic fulfillment" (McCormick 2001: 286). Mark Coeckelbergh endorses a similar view. On his account, by "training moral insensitivity," and inhibiting the development of empathy, playing violent video games could prevent us from becoming "virtuous, flourishing human beings" (Coeckelbergh 2007: 230; 2011: 94–95). The upshot of this approach is that even if playing violent video games does not directly cause immoral behavior, it nevertheless may damage one's moral character.

Predictably, not all theorists agree with this view. According to some, playing certain types of violent video games might actually be virtuous. Aristotle's theory is not the only model of virtue ethics, and it is possible that other virtue theorists would consider some instances of violent video game play praiseworthy. Some, for example, consider Friedrich Nietzsche a virtue ethicist (Brobjer 2003; Daigle 2006). Nietzsche endorsed virtues such as courage, creativity, and strength of will. Playing violent video games might well enhance these virtues (Wonderly 2008: 4–5; Young 2013: 94–95). Marcus Schulzke argues that Aristotle himself suggested that not all violence is irreconcilable with virtue—some virtues being "exemplified in combat," so even an Aristotelian virtue ethicist needn't object to violent video games as such (Schulzke 2010: 131).

This line of argument brings to the fore an important point: violent video games vary widely in terms of the particular kinds of virtual acts that they permit or require from players. Taking down an enemy combatant in a first-person shooter game, and stalking and torturing an innocent victim in a stealth-based survivor horror game, if they impact one's character at all, may do so in very different ways (and to very different degrees). What is needed is a more informative account of the conditions under which playing violent video games impede or diminish virtue.

Interestingly, some philosophers adopt a virtue-theoretic approach not to argue that playing video games can harm one's character, but that certain reactions to particular kinds of games

might *reflect* poor character in the player. Stephanie Patridge, for example, suggests that some video games feature content that, when viewed against the historical and social backdrop of one's society, has "incorrigible social meaning" and that our responses to such meanings "bear on evaluations of our character" (Patridge 2011: 304). Patridge here has in mind video games like *Custer's Revenge*. She explains that *Custer's Revenge* invites the player to be entertained by a representation of a rape of a Native American woman, but intuitively, one should not enjoy representations like that (2011: 306). In a properly informed and appropriately sensitive individual, such representations would call to mind actual atrocities against unjustly targeted groups—in this case, women and minorities—that should preclude enjoyment.

In a later work, Patridge employs this notion to address what has been dubbed the "Gamer's Dilemma." In brief, the Gamer's Dilemma asks, why, if (as many have claimed) virtual murder is morally acceptable because it harms no one in the actual world, should we not regard virtual pedophilia as equally benign for the same reason (Luck 2009)?[2] While Patridge does not purport to decisively solve the dilemma, she thinks that elements of her view can explain why virtual child pedophilia might elicit reactions that some other violent video games do not. She explains that a game that invites one to sexually assault a character simply because it represents a child might call to mind actual child sexual assault victims who were similarly targeted because of their youth. This association might (and likely should) make it more difficult—if not impossible—to enjoy the game (Patridge 2013: 32). We would expect some, but not all, nonsexual, violent video games to elicit similar reactions—in particular, games that are thickly laden with social meaning, e.g., a "lynching game" (Patridge 2013: 33).

There are also others who've suggested that one can have morally inappropriate responses to certain types of virtual content, such as enjoying virtual child pornography or becoming sexually aroused by virtual depictions of rape (Veber 2004; Gooskens 2010). In these cases, one might think it reasonable to suspect that the subject of these responses has a morally flawed character. What is less clear, however, is whether such reasoning might be extended to players of violent video games more broadly. Do players who becomes excited or joyful upon employing their character to kill or torture computer-controlled characters reflect poor character on that account? Or might such reactions represent natural, more or less, benign responses to exploring new, socially 'taboo' activities in a harmless virtual environment? These questions are difficult ones that have inspired a great deal of controversy in the literature on ethics and violent video games (see, for example, Young and Whitty 2012; Young 2013).

Addressing the Concerns

Having rehearsed the most prominent approaches to assessing the ethics of playing violent video games, we are now in a position to take stock. Historically, video games featuring content perceived as excessively violent have drawn moral criticism from an indignant (and sometimes, morally outraged) public. Defenders of violent video games have insisted that such criticisms are unwarranted, as committing acts of virtual violence against computer-controlled characters—no matter how heinous or cruel those actions would be if performed in real life—harm no actual people. Theorists attempting to articulate the moral significance of such games have suggested that playing them can (1) inspire immoral behaviors outside the gaming environment, (2) impact certain aspects of our psychology in morally pernicious ways, and/or (3) damage or reflect poor character. These claims, however, have not gone uncontested. Some have asserted that the differences between virtual and actual violence are salient enough to prevent gamers from letting their experiences in video games bleed over into their actual behaviors and attitudes, and they have challenged the empirical research that suggests otherwise. So the question remains, "Where do we go from here?"

On my view, first we must acknowledge that there is real cause for concern. While it is unlikely that playing an hour of *Grand Theft Auto* will turn a person into a murderer, it is perhaps equally unlikely that regularly and repeatedly simulating acts of wanton, graphic violence against virtual human characters will have no negative psychological impact on a sizable percentage of video game players who do so—especially given that many such players are children. Both common sense and a preponderance of the best empirical research available suggest as much.

Second, we should call for more empirical studies in order to better determine the extent of the impact playing violent video games tends to have, the particular features of violent games that tend to cause the most harm, and the specific groups that are most vulnerable to those harms. These studies should be conducted by unbiased experts and subject to review by independent organizations with the means to fairly and accurately assess the quality of the research. Once the relevant information has been obtained, there should be vigorous attempts to disseminate it to video game players, parents of children who play video games, video game developers, legislators, and other interested parties.

Third, when deciding whether to alter or restrict video game content, policy makers should take into account not only the potential harms of playing violent video games, but the potential *positive* effects of playing such games as well. Some have argued, for example, that playing some kinds of violent video games can be cathartic, allowing players to vent aggression and hostility that might otherwise be inflicted on actual people (Brey 1999: 8; Brey 2008: 369; Nys 2010: 86; Schulzke 2010: 133). Also, some violent video games incorporate morally interesting narratives, artful imagery and musical scores, and sophisticated haptical technologies that allow for gaming experiences that are not only pleasurable, but also aesthetically—and perhaps even morally—enriching. Miguel Sicart has argued that mature players can benefit from violent video games that confront them with moral dilemmas, exploiting a tension between their objectives in the gaming world and their preexisting ethical commitments (Sicart 2009a: 199–200; Sicart 2009b: 113–116). Thus, the moral significance of violent video games may extend not only to their potential harms, but also to their benefits as well.

Ethicists have identified several plausible grounds for suspecting that playing violent video games can be morally problematic, but looming questions threaten to undermine the persuasiveness of their arguments. I have argued that as it stands, there is sufficient reason to take modest steps in order to address the concerns that these theorists have raised. These steps include new empirical studies, vigorous attempts to educate the public about the results of such studies, and a decision-making procedure that takes into account both the negative and positive aspects of playing violent video games.

Notes

1 One way to support the latter position is to maintain that a player's actions within a video game are *never* appropriate objects of moral assessment. On this view, what gaming characters ought, or ought not, to do is constrained solely by the rules and objectives of the game itself. Of course, this position seems baldly untenable when applied to some genres of video games. Some games represent virtual *communities* in which actual human beings can interact with one another via their personalized avatars. In games such as *World of Warcraft*, *EVE Online*, and *The Elder Scrolls*, players can not only challenge one another in battle, but they can also establish friendships, forge alliances, engage in complex economic transactions, and in some cases, even (virtually) marry other players. In these environments, while individuals cannot physically injure one another, gamers can—and sometimes do—maliciously deceive, harass, and steal from their fellow players, even where such actions are not prescribed by the game. In these gaming contexts, then, it is fairly clear that virtual actions can have real-world ethical implications. For more on the ethical status of actions performed within virtual communities, see Dunn (2012).

2 Luck's puzzle has prompted a number of responses. Christopher Bartel, drawing on Neil Levy's work on virtual child pornography, argued that while virtual pedophilia may not harm actual children, it may yet—in virtue of sexualizing inequality—harm actual women (Bartel 2012). A decade earlier, Neil Levy argued that obtaining "equal status" for all women requires a "new sexuality" in which sexual relations are conducted between equals, and by "eroticizing inequality," virtual child pornography might hinder progress toward this important ideal (Levy 2002: 322). For commentary on Bartel's application of this suggestion to the Gamer's Dilemma, see Luck and Ellerby 2013 and Patridge 2013.

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