

## Violent computer games, empathy, and cosmopolitanism

Mark Coeckelbergh

Department of Philosophy, University of Twente, P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE, Enschede, The Netherlands  
E-mail: m.coeckelbergh@utwente.nl

**Abstract.** Many philosophical and public discussions of the ethical aspects of violent computer games typically centre on the relation between playing violent videogames and its supposed direct consequences on violent behaviour. But such an approach rests on a controversial empirical claim, is often one-sided in the range of moral theories used, and remains on a general level with its focus on content alone. In response to these problems, I pick up Matt McCormick's thesis that potential harm from playing computer games is best construed as harm to one's character, and propose to redirect our attention to the question how violent computer games influence the moral character of players. Inspired by the work of Martha Nussbaum, I sketch a positive account of how computer games can stimulate an empathetic and cosmopolitan moral development. Moreover, rather than making a general argument applicable to a wide spectrum of media, my concern is with specific features of violent computer games that make them especially morally problematic in terms of empathy and cosmopolitanism, features that have to do with the connections between content and medium, and between virtuality and reality. I also discuss some remaining problems. In this way I hope contribute to a less polarised discussion about computer games that does justice to the complexity of their moral dimension, and to offer an account that is helpful to designers, parents, and other stakeholders.

**Key words:** computer games, cosmopolitanism, empathy, Nussbaum, violence

### Introduction

Many computer games involve virtual violence, but some have caused public moral outrage and can be called *violent*: those in which the player repeatedly engages in violent actions, and in which such violence is glorified. A famous example is *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA). Since the player takes on the role of a criminal, who can only make progression in the game by doing things such as hijacking, bank robbery, and killing innocent by-standers, the game is taken to glorify crime. But does its highly violent character render the game immoral? The same question can be asked about another highly controversial computer game: *Manhunt*. The player takes on the role of someone who is forced to participate in snuff films by performing cruel 'executions' using a variety of weapons. The game has been banned in several countries.

Defenders of such games argue that games are just games, and that gamers are well able to make a

difference between the virtual and the real. But this claim is controversial. Empirical research suggests that aggression and violence may be the effect of gaming. In 'Video Game Violence and Public Policy'<sup>1</sup> David Walsh summarises some research results. Violent computer games seem not only to provoke violent thoughts and feelings, but aggressive anti-social behaviour as well. Is this true?

Philosophical and public discussions of the ethical aspects of violent computer games typically centre on the relation between playing violent videogames and its supposed direct consequences for violent behaviour. Roughly speaking, claims made are of the type 'game X has harmful consequences Y', and then consequentialist or deontological arguments are combined with empirical research in support of the claim. Such arguments are linked to the common sense notion that what happens in one domain spills over in another domain. The metaphor of contami-

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ACLA 2006 conference in Princeton, 25 March 2006.

<sup>1</sup> D. Walsh. *Video Game Violence and Public Policy*. Retrieved from <http://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/conf2001/papers/walsh.html>. The University of Chicago Cultural Policy Centre, 2001.

nation may be used: it is supposed that there is a contamination between virtuality and reality. This approach has several drawbacks.

First, it is contingent on the empirical claim that there be a causal relation between playing the game and violent behaviour. Both the consequentialist, who proposes to weigh the benefits against the potential harms, and the Kantian, who understands such harms in terms of a disrespect for (real) persons as ends,<sup>2</sup> depend on empirical proof that there are, or that there are not, harmful consequences for the player and/or for others. This is a drawback for several reasons. First, there are studies for and against, so philosophers are tempted to pick out the one or few that suit their arguments best. Second, even if the studies were methodologically flawless and pointed in the same direction (which would raise eyebrows indeed), we know at least since Hume that observed *correlations* does not necessarily flag causation. Third, even if correlations pointed to a causal link between playing a particular game and a violent predisposition, our explanation and understanding must still travel all the way from predisposition to act. There are many environmental influences, and it is hard to show that playing games is the most important factor. Finally, even we could show this, environmental and biological factors do not determine human acts, there is always space for human freedom. While these objections do not imply that we should neglect empirical studies per se, they do point to significant handicaps of arguments that focus on direct behavioural consequences, and encourage a search for a complementary if not alternative approach.

Second, the range of moral theories used in these arguments is limited to one or two: consequentialism and/or deontology. As McCormick has argued in this journal, Aristotelian theory offers a plausible way of looking at the issue: violent games may (not) erode one's character and make it difficult to live the good life.<sup>3</sup> I will not repeat his arguments against consequentialist and Kantian theory, but follow his suggestion that we could try a character-based approach. However, he does not offer a positive account.

Third, the argument that violent computer games tend to produce violent behavioural consequences is

too general if it is made on account of their violent content alone. If it is only content that matters, then the argument can be made for other media as well, such as novels, TV, board games, etc. While I believe we need more and sustained reflection on the general question regarding the role of violence in our contemporary world, such arguments do not explain the moral outrage (some) violent computer games produce in the wider public. We want to know what it is, specific to computer games, that makes them morally problematic. A view that assumes a too strong distinction between content and medium cannot answer this question and remains too general. If we want to do justice to the specificity of computer games, we should look at the particular way in which content and medium are intertwined in the case of computer gaming. A similar point can be made for the relation between virtuality and reality, as I will show in my discussion below.

I propose to start from the point where McCormick left us. If we are to redirect our attention to the question how violent computer games influence the moral character of players, then how does such an account look like? Inspired by the work of Martha Nussbaum, I discuss whether and how computer games stimulate an empathetic and cosmopolitan moral development. Moreover, rather than only making a general argument applicable to a wide spectrum of media, my concern is with specific features of violent computer games that make them especially morally problematic in terms of empathy and cosmopolitanism, features that have to do with the connections between content and medium, and between virtuality and reality.

First I will clarify what I mean by empathy and cosmopolitanism as elements of moral development, based on an integration and reconstruction of what I take to be Nussbaum's view.<sup>4</sup> Then I will analyse computer games in the light of that account, exploring if and how computer games (do not) stimulate the training of an empathetic and cosmopolitan moral stance. I will do that according to two models: an 'external' one that mainly considers the relation between virtual games and real behaviour, and an 'internal' one that zooms in on the internal relations, in particular on the interactions between the (first-person, the player's) game character, on the one hand, and other characters in the game and features of the game, on the other hand. I propose to direct our attention to the question if and how games – due to their internal structure – prevent the training of an

<sup>2</sup> Let me explain this point. The Kantian cannot argue that the player treats another person not as an end in itself, since the virtual other is not a person. Thus, the only route available to the Kantian is the contamination argument: the consequence of playing a violent game is that the person will not treat other real persons as an end in themselves.

<sup>3</sup> M. McCormick. Is it wrong to play violent video games? *Ethics and Information Technology* 3: 277–287, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> See also M. Coeckelbergh, *Imagination and Principles: An Essay on the Role of Imagination in Moral Reasoning* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke/New York, 2007, pp. 73–115.

empathetic and cosmopolitan character. Finally, I will discuss some remaining problems and objections. Perhaps this approach cannot repair all problems indicated above equally well.

Note that I use the term ‘computer games’, which is more generic than ‘videogames’: it includes on-line and off-line games played on a computer. Note also that I will limit myself here to the problem of *violence* in computer games. There are other moral problems.<sup>5</sup>

### Sketch of a character-based account

A contemporary character-based, moral development account can be found in the work of Nussbaum. She also allows me to elaborate Matt McCormick’s suggestion that an Aristotelian perspective has much to offer us with respect to ethics of computer games. Let me reconstruct her view on the basis of two terms: empathy and cosmopolitanism. This will then be used as a framework to discuss violent computer games.

#### *Nussbaum on empathy and cosmopolitanism*

One important component of moral development may be the development of empathy. Empathy is a controversial term. I take it to refer to an imaginative process of perspective-shifting, sometimes described as ‘putting yourself in the shoes of someone else’. Let me elaborate my definition by using Nussbaum’s work.

First, although empathy can involve putting yourself in the shoes of a very happy person, the term is often applied in a context of suffering. According to Nussbaum’s definition in *Upheavals of Thought*, it involves ‘an imaginative reconstruction of experience of the sufferer’.<sup>6</sup> For example, we may imagine the

suffering of someone who is in pain. Second, imagining the sufferer’s experience does not mean that we become the other. Nussbaum compares empathy to acting, involving “the participatory enactment of the situation of the sufferer”.<sup>7</sup> In most cases, then, we are very well aware of the difference between ourselves and the sufferer, there is no identification. For example, if I imagine someone suffering, I know that I’m not the one who suffers.<sup>8</sup>

What is wanted, it seems, is a kind of “twofold attention,” in which one both imagines what it is like to be in the sufferer’s place and, at the same time, retains securely the awareness that one is not in that place.<sup>9</sup>

Third, we can use empathy with or without (feeling) compassion. Illustrating the first meaning of empathy, Nussbaum offers the example of an empathetic torturer who enjoys the suffering of the victim without feeling any compassion.<sup>10</sup>

In my discussion of computer games I will use empathy in the sense of a compassionate shift in perspective to someone who is suffering, which does not involve identification. And although it is by no means self-evident that empathy is the way forward to take an ethical stance as opposed to taking an external perspective on others,<sup>11</sup> let us assume that it is, that empathy is something we should cultivate if we want to become morally better persons. Nussbaum is famous for her view that literature can help us cultivate empathy and that, therefore, it assists moral development. Why literature? In *Poetic Justice* she argues that literature stimulates the active emotions and imagination of the reader.<sup>12</sup> She chooses the novel in particular since she sees it as “the central morally serious yet popularly engaging fictional form of our culture”.<sup>13</sup> Nussbaum discusses novels (for example from Dickens’s *Hard Times*) to argue that literature forces us to consider the other. ‘Others’ includes strangers, people who are not similar to ourselves. We come to understand that others are different *and* similar, and get the insight that we are

<sup>5</sup> For example, Philip Brey sees three ways in which computer games are value-laden: there are values in the way they represent the world (e.g. gender assumptions), in the interactions that they make possible (e.g. suggesting only violent actions as solutions to problems), and in the storylines and in the feedback and rewards that are given (e.g. extra points for killing innocent bystanders). The problem of violence is related to all three dimensions and to more structural characteristics of computer games; in terms of the dimensions mentioned my emphasis will be on *violent* (inter-)actions and their representation and reward-system. See P. Brey. Virtual Reality and Computer Simulation. Ed. Himma, K. and Tavani, H., *The Handbook of Information and Computer Ethics*, John Wiley & Sons. Compare H. Nissenbaum 1998. Values in the Design of Computer Systems. *Computers and Society* (March 1998): 38–39. 1998.

<sup>6</sup> M.C. Nussbaum. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press, New York. 2001, p. 327.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>11</sup> This depends on one’s definition of empathy. See for example Peter Goldie’s recent arguments against empathy and perspective-shifting in P. Goldie. Dramatic Irony and the External Perspective. Paper presented at the Royal Institute of Philosophy annual conference Narrative and Understanding Persons (Royal Institute of Philosophy, 12 July 2006) and P. Goldie. Anti-Empathy: Against Empathy as Perspective Shifting. Workshop paper (Delft University of Technology, 17 January 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Nussbaum. *Poetic Justice*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

all vulnerable. Circumstances may change, and (I infer) if we consider that we may have ended up, or may end up, in a position similar to that of the other, we care more for them.

Nussbaum relates her argument about empathy and literature to the issue of cosmopolitanism, which she interprets as (requiring) a moral stance. In *Poetic Justice* Nussbaum claims that the literary imagination is “an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own”.<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, Nussbaum argues in *Cultivating Humanity* for empathetic cosmopolitanism. Empathy allows us “to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us”.<sup>15</sup> Thus, if cosmopolitanism requires the kind of ‘ethical stance’ described above, it appears that we will be better world citizens if we use our capacity for empathy to understand people of different religion, gender, national origin, etc. She refers to Rousseau to argue that education can help us to acquire the right kind of attitude, since it can make us aware of the contingency of life and our own vulnerability: “Rousseau argues that a good education, which acquaints one with all the usual vicissitudes of fortune, will make it difficult to refuse acknowledgement to the poor or the sick, or slaves, or members of lower classes. It is easy to see that any one of those might really have been me, given a change of circumstances”.<sup>16</sup>

In *Cultivating Humanity* Nussbaum further develops her argument that reading literature is a way of cultivating empathy and cosmopolitanism. Literature “can transport us, while remaining ourselves, into the life of another, revealing similarities but also profound differences between the life and thought of that other and myself and making them comprehensible, or at least more nearly comprehensible”.<sup>17</sup> Stories can show the dependence of our well being on a change of circumstances. Nussbaum gives examples from ancient Greek tragedy and from modern novels. Literature can give a voice to outcast or oppressed people. Using the metaphor in Nussbaum’s quotation of Walt Whitman’s poem *Song of Myself*,<sup>18</sup> we may express this function of literature as removing the veil to allow us to hear the voices silenced by injustice. The imaginative activity of author and reader promotes “awareness of need and disadvantage, and in

that sense gives substance to the abstract desire for justice”.<sup>19</sup> Literature allows us access to the minds of “people who seem alien and frightening”,<sup>20</sup> it enhances our capacity for openness and responsiveness.

Let me summarise my reconstruction of Nussbaum’s argument as an account of the capacities that are required for cosmopolitanism: cultivating our capacity for empathy is essential for achieving the right kind of ethical stance that is required for cosmopolitanism, since this cultivation helps us to understand how others are different and similar to ourselves, and promotes our openness and responsiveness to voices from outcast and oppressed people.

Note that Nussbaum’s source of inspiration is not only Aristotle, whose focus on moral character and development she endorses, but also the Stoic ideal of cosmopolitanism. In *For Love of Country*<sup>21</sup> she proposes a cosmopolitan education: we should teach children and students that they are “above all, citizens of a world of human beings”.<sup>22</sup> It is a moral ideal, a moral stance which, according to Nussbaum, is intrinsically valuable since “it recognises in people what is especially fundamental about them, most worthy of respect and acknowledgment: their aspirations to justice and goodness and their capacities for reasoning in this connection”.<sup>23</sup> Taking this stance does not imply that we must give up local identifications. Rather than thinking of ourselves as devoid of local affiliations, we should see ourselves as being surrounded by a series of concentric circles.<sup>24</sup> Nussbaum argues that in terms of education, this means that we should stimulate students to imagine the different, to enter into the other person’s mind, and to think of the world as a single body, a community of human beings.<sup>25</sup> We should learn about others and the rest of the world, recognise that a shared future requires global solutions, learn that we have moral obligations to the rest of the world, and regard national boundaries as morally arbitrary. As elsewhere, Nussbaum argues that novels can play a key role in this cosmopolitan education.<sup>26</sup>

Let me now return to the issue of violent computer games. Before I propose criteria to judge their contribution to moral development based on Nuss-

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

<sup>15</sup> Nussbaum. *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>21</sup> M.C. Nussbaum (with Respondents). *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*, editor J. Cohen. Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

baum's view, I try to locate the moral problem with violent computer games. In my introduction I proposed two models for that purpose: an 'external' one, which focuses on content and the relation between the real and the virtual, on the one hand, and an 'internal' one, which emphasises the (inter)actions within the game and the interaction between content and medium. Let me elaborate this point.

*Violence and games: arguments based on the external model (content)*

A common approach to ethics of computer games considers the content of the games, and the relation between playing the game with that content and behaviour in the real world. The content of the games is judged by generally accepted moral norms that forbid certain acts. The metaphor used may be that of contamination: if the content is bad, surely we must prevent it to spill over from the virtual world into the real world. The one who argues for or against a certain game, will imagine that the acts in the game take place in the real world, and then judge that act by the criteria we usually use. There are several problems with this approach.

First, those who argue against violent computer games in this way, and do so consistently, will stumble upon a much larger difficulty. Imagining these acts in the real world, we see that this is surprisingly easily. We are faced with it all the time in other mass media. The main moral problem is not only with the virtual world but also, and more, with the real world. Violent games attempt to mirror real environments and their violent characteristics. For example, GTA games project environments that are inspired by real-world violence in real big cities such as Los Angeles and London. Thus, in terms of priority, moral outrage should be directed to the world we live in at large, rather than to computer games only. This is not excuse for neglecting moral problems with violent computer games, but it puts the problem in perspective. Moreover, some of us may approve of the very same acts of violence when they are performed in the context of (real) war (that is, as long as they do not have to watch them on TV), self-defence, or defence of their family. Thus, next to judging computer games we should at least also reflect on the role of violence in the society we live in, and what we can do about it. I believe that not only utilitarians must rethink our attitude towards many risky activities, as McCormick argues.<sup>27</sup> Since the pleasure argument is a major argument put forward

by defenders of violent computer games, we are faced with this problem. What level of risk do we, as a society, want to allow for recreational activities? McCormick fears that "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".<sup>28</sup> But this is not a good argument against the Kantian approach. There may be good reasons to 'condemn' other activities on these grounds, regardless of what people generally think about them, such as some extreme sport activities. The lesson to learn here, however, is that we should not be concerned with condemning activities as a whole, such as game playing, but with the *content* of the games, sports, or other activities. (I agree with McCormick, however, that benefits should not be completely discounted in our moral reasoning about computer games.)

Second, *anyone* who takes into consideration the benefits of computer games in his moral reasoning – not only the utilitarian who weighs the benefits against the harms – risks to neglect the important question why people derive pleasure at all from committing (virtual) violent acts. Why is it that people *enjoy* playing these violent games? Is it only because the 'game play' and the graphics are so good? In other words, do they enjoy playing the game because it is a good game on account of supposedly amoral, morally neutral characteristics? But then they could play other games, which they do not. It is the case that people who play violent games also derive pleasure from violence. This observation should make us reflect on who we are, and what we can do about it. For example, in 'Playing a "Good" Game'<sup>29</sup> Ren Reynolds shows how a consequentialist weights the pleasure of the player against the potential (bad) consequences for the player (and his possible victims). Why are violent computer games so attractive? In 'Morality Play – Creating Ethics in Video Games'<sup>30</sup> Thompson suggests that in computer games players can explore how things look at the

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>29</sup> R. Reynolds. *Playing a 'Good' Game: A Philosophical Approach to Understanding the Morality of Games*. Retrieved from [http://www.igda.org/articles/rreynolds\\_ethics.php](http://www.igda.org/articles/rreynolds_ethics.php). International Game Developers Association, 2002.

<sup>30</sup> A. J. Thompson. *Morality Play: Creating Ethics in Video Games*. Retrieved from: <http://www.adamjthompson.com/thought/CreatingEthics.html>, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> M. McCormick. *Is it wrong to play violent video games?*, p. 281.

'other' side. They stimulate moral exploration.<sup>31</sup> But this is the case with literature and film as well.

Indeed, and this is my third point, while this kind of discussions are badly needed, they remain very general and not directed towards computer games in particular. We may as well look at the violent content of other games, books, films, TV programmes, etc. This is worthwhile, but it does not deliver a more detailed discussion of the moral problems of computer games. Why is it that computer games provoke so much outrage, as opposed to TV journals and films with violent content? What is the moral relevance of the particular characteristics of computer games? In the next section, I will link questions of content with questions of media.

Fourth, general arguments for or against violence in computer games tends to see violence as a monolithic block rather than analysing what exactly is goes wrong, and this is partly due to a lack of a positive moral project. Certain games are rejected for 'obvious' reasons, but more detailed arguments are welcome. Nussbaum's view of moral development is such a positive project, and allows a more fine-grained analysis of the violence in computer games.

*Violence and games: arguments based on the internal model (interaction content and medium)*

To repair some of the problems with the external model, let me turn again to the Nussbaumian framework and apply it to computer games, taking into account their specificity as a medium.

First, what is empathy in the context of computer games? Let me first say what it is not. It is not the use of an avatar of becoming a character. Although the narrative of the game requires me to put myself in the

place of a character (in the games mentioned a criminal), which may initially be aided by some empathy, I am supposed to identify with the character. The game developers aim for immersion. At the other end of the spectrum is that I use the body of the avatar but remain myself. What is specific for computer games? In a novel we are also invited to identify with the character. But computer games are much more active. I'm supposed to act in the virtual world. And these acts constitute who I am – at least during the period of the play. This is why I become a *character*, rather than merely look through the eyes of a character. Although novels can take readers also towards identification, the (inter)active aspect of computer games enhances that identification. And whereas the utilitarian and the Kantian worry about the (consequences of) acts, the Aristotelian focus is on the kind of person I become by training in this way. In the end, they all want to avoid violent acts in the real world, but the Aristotelian focus on trajectories of (im)moral development draws our attention to the time dimension. The moral problem, then, is not so much with committing virtual moral acts as such, but with doing that repeatedly, with training these acts.

A further departure from the content/external view is that the focus shifts from looking at real actions (that are supposed to be the consequence of gaming) to analysing virtual game interactions. First, the (first-perspective) character, with whom the player identifies, can be represented in several ways. I may see my avatar/character from an external point of view (third person perspective), or I may see through the eyes of the character (which means that there is no avatar on the screen, this is called the first person perspective). The kind of (im)moral training may be different in both cases (see below). Second, I (the character) am not the only being or entity around in the virtual world. There may be virtual people, virtual animals, virtual monsters, etc. In the case of multi-player on-line games virtual people may be the avatars of real existing people. This makes the moral problem more complicated. What is the moral significance of 'murdering' a virtual person whose actions are generated by the programme as opposed to 'murdering' a virtual person who is connected to a real person? Third, virtual environments increasingly resemble the real world, not only in terms of representation of buildings but also in representation of acts, social relations, and narratives. Multi-player games become virtual worlds (think about *Second Life*). What is the moral impact of this development?

Let me develop this last point. Today many computer games are on-line games, which involve many players who interact in a virtual environment. So-called Massively-Multiplayer Online Games

<sup>31</sup> It is not obvious to me that moral exploration is a good thing, by itself. For example, the work of De Sade is an exercise in moral exploration. But is it morally good? Do we need to explore the caves of evil in order to climb the mountains of the good? I'm not sure. Furthermore, it's not clear to me that gamers are after moral exploration. In terms of the spatial metaphor, there are at three possible attitudes towards violence and evil. The first one is neglect: I don't want to know what it's like to act in such a way. The evil 'other' is neglected. The second one is moral exploration: I want to know what it's like to act evil and try it out. The 'other' gets colonised. The third attitude is moral tourism: I know what it's like, and I want to consume my projection of the other (no real exploration but consumption). Since most gamers know what virtual violence is like by other means than games (mass media), and since they do not really know, or want to know, what it's like to act violently or to be exposed to evil in the real world, their so-called exploration look more like moral tourism to me.

(MMOGs) allow thousands of people to play simultaneously in an online world. Such computer games constitute a social context similar to the social context of the real world. As Warner and Raiter put it:

Social dynamics are central to the popularity of MMOGs. An integral part of the gaming experience involves strategic navigation through shared space while competing with and against each other for shared resources. Consequently, MMOGs expand the typical social context of electronic play to include identity development, community building, establishing rules of conduct, and efforts to manage conflict that occurs within game communities.<sup>32</sup>

Given this social and interactive aspect of their virtual environment, these computer games increasingly resemble the real world. Furthermore, the activities in such computer games are sometimes quasi-real. For example, with virtual gambling you can earn virtual money, and this virtual money is exchanged in the 'real' world money (online). People buy characters. There is an exchange between virtual money, real money, and the characters one can buy with real money. Moreover, beyond real-world financial and commercial transactions, violent actions that are 'normal' in the virtual world of the game can take place in the real world (see above). If gamers who argue that violent actions are part of the game, but do not have implications for the real world, we are again discussing the problem in terms of the relation between the real and the virtual. But if we focus on how the game interactions may alter the character (development) of players, it is easier to show the connection between the two: if people are trained to commit violent acts in a game such as *GTA* or *Manhunt*, there may be no direct causal link between a game (virtual) action and a real-world action, but it is plausible that the character of the person will be influenced. The plausibility increases not since there is a sort of 'violence virus' escaping from the virtual world and breaking into the real world. Rather, the plausibility of violent dispositions increases since the gamer is trained *in* the virtual world, and since that virtual world becomes increasingly more like the real world. In other words, the training environment comes to resemble the real world, and the way the player relates to others in the virtual world comes to resemble the way (s)he relates to others in the real world. We can make a distinction between how the environment is

represented and how actions are performed. Both can have a high degree of 'reality', and technological developments aim towards highly realistic virtual reality. The goal is to achieve full immediacy, to erase the medium.<sup>33</sup> This is impossible, of course, but the player should get the impression that the virtual is the real. Brey defines highly realistic virtual reality as "reality in which the user is totally immersed, just like in the real environment, because the perceptual and interactive features of the environment have the same richness as features in a real environment".<sup>34</sup> If such *structural* similarities can be observed (as opposed to mere events that are supposed to be causally related: for example, (s)he killed someone in virtuality therefore (s)he will kill someone in reality), then it is more likely that the character of the player will change. This problem will increase when games get better. In McCormick's words: if we are involved in "an activity that feels remarkably like the real thing," it is likely that "the extent of the moral influence of the game character and game activities will increase" as well. With regard to MMOGs, then, I agree with his suggestion that we need to study "how the interactions between my game representative and my opponent's game representative affect me and my opponent"<sup>35</sup> in terms of character.

Generally speaking, such arguments give us a better and more specific reason to recommend the discouragement of playing *certain* violent games: *in so far as* their violent content interacts with the structural features mentioned in such a way that the moral character of the player is corrupted, we should discourage the development and use of these games. *GTA* and *Manhunt* seem to satisfy this criterion, and should be responded to accordingly. Although it is hard to show that there are direct causal links between playing such a game and committing violent acts, it is plausible to conclude that they erode the moral character of the player, and this constitutes a good reason to discourage playing them. However, this argument, by itself, is not sufficient to support a ban or other legal action (I will return to this point in my conclusion). On a more positive note, we can conclude that game designers should be encouraged to use their creativity to develop computer games that

<sup>32</sup> D.E. Warner and M. Raiter. Social Context in Massively-Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs): Ethical Questions in Shared Space. *International Review of Information Ethics* 4 (December): 47, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> For an analysis of computer games in terms of mediation see J.D. Bolter and R. Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA/London.

<sup>34</sup> P. Brey. The Ethics of Representation and Action in Virtual Reality. *Ethics and Information Technology* 1: 5–14, 1999.

<sup>35</sup> M. McCormick. *Is it wrong to play violent video games?*, p. 287.

allow moral exploration but also stimulate the training of empathy – their success on both fronts being due to the similarities to real social interaction.

A stronger point is that virtual environments are suitable *par excellence* to stimulate empathy. As Bolter and Grusin put it in their summary of research on the matter, virtual reality gives us a freedom which enables us “to occupy the position, and therefore the point of view, of people or creatures different from ourselves” – indeed, it even makes possible empathy with animals such as a gorilla.<sup>36</sup> This freedom to be someone (or something) else can contribute to moral development: by occupying the other’s perspective, we get closer to Nussbaum’s requirement that we understand the other, including similarities and differences. If people lack the imagination to do this without help of the computer, virtual reality helps.

However, there are reasons to be less optimistic when we consider again the social aspects of gaming. Apart from interactivity and structural and social likeness between the virtual and the real world, it is specific for *on-line* multi-player computer games that they allow anonymity. As McCormick puts it when commenting on the Kantian approach: “the faceless anonymity of the Internet makes it easier to disrespect people’s value as humans”.<sup>37</sup> Such anonymity is also likely to inhibit the training of empathy. As Levinas has pointed out in his work, if we do not see the other’s face, it is much easier to hurt or kill the other. Thus, *in so far as* computer games have an on-line, social interactive aspect that allows anonymity, the development of an empathetic personality may be harder to achieve.

There is also some empirical support for the developmental view, although such research tends to focus on contamination arguments concerning the relation between violent computer games and real-world violence, rather than on the relevance of features internal to the game. Anderson and Dill conclude in their study of video game violence and trait aggressiveness that “the positive association between violent video games and aggressive personality is consistent with a developmental model in which extensive exposures to violent video games (and other violent media) contributes to the creation of an aggressive personality”.<sup>38</sup> However, this

remains *support*, since, as the authors say, since the study concerns *correlations*, “causal statements are risky at best”.<sup>39</sup> In this respect, we are still left with the causation problem I indicated above. Furthermore, since in the opinion the results are applicable to other media as well, further empirical research is needed that takes into account the specific structural characteristics of computer games. Research in this direction is taking off. For example, Wood, Griffiths, Chappell, and Davies have examined rather ‘technical’ characteristics such as sound, graphics, background and setting, duration of the game, rate of play, advancement rate, use of humour, control options, game dynamics, winning and losing features, game character development, brand assurance, and multi-player features.<sup>40</sup> They conclude that the success of a video game depends on the degree of realism (we may say: representation), competitiveness (reported in particular by males), communication (reported in particular by females), rapid absorption, rapid advancement, and so on.<sup>41</sup> Such research helps us to understand why people enjoy certain games, and, consequently, why they became so successful. And there is a study by Farrar, Krcmar and Nowak<sup>42</sup> which analyses contextual features, such as internal game manipulations. For example, they looked at the relation between degree of immersion in the game, on the one hand, and playing in first person (which means the player does not see the main character) or in third person, on the other hand. When players were more immersed in the game, they reported greater hostility and aggression.<sup>43</sup> The authors conclude that “perceptions of the game can themselves be crucial”.<sup>44</sup> However, the problem with that study is that it lacks the developmental perspective: there is no concern for long-term effects on personality, the focus is on direct, immediate effect on feelings of hostility and aggression as reported by the test persons. If an empirical study were to combine the strengths of the approaches used in these three studies, we may get more useful results, although the causation problem persists (see my discussion of objections below).

<sup>36</sup> J.D. Bolter and R. Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA/London, p. 245.

<sup>37</sup> M. McCormick. *Is it wrong to play violent video games?*, p. 282.

<sup>38</sup> C.A. Anderson and K.E. Dill. Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Behaviour in the Laboratory and in Life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78 (2000), p. 782.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 782.

<sup>40</sup> R.T.A. Wood, M.D. Griffiths, D. Chappell, and M.N.O. Davies. The Structural Characteristics of Video Games: A Psycho-Structural Analysis. *CyberPsychology and Behaviour* 7(1): 1–10, 2004.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>42</sup> K.M. Farrar, M. Krcmar and K.L. Nowak. Contextual Features of Violent Video Games, Mental Models, and Aggression. *Journal of Communication* 56 (2006): 387–405.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 399–400.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401.

*Moral criteria*

Apart from problems specific to empirical methodologies, the studies just mentioned are descriptive and not normative, although they may contribute to normative arguments provided we take into account the mentioned difficulties. But how to decide the normative question regarding violent computer games? Next to general moral norms available in our culture and society, which we can use for deciding about the moral *acceptability* of a game, we can use the more detailed criteria outlined in the previous section. The more precise conditions for a game to be morally problematic are not only (1) that there is violent content, but also (2) that there are particular structural similarities between the virtual and the real world in place, and (3) that they un-train – or, at least, do not allow or inhibit development and training of – empathy. Through their interactive aspect combined with violent content, violent computer games are particularly suitable to un-train or inhibit the development of empathy. How, then, to avoid such consequences? How to train empathy? McCormick does not discuss how to improve the player's character. We can use Nussbaum's work to provide more specific moral criteria to judge whether or not a computer game is beneficial, works towards a positive moral and political project:

- (1) Does the game train our capacity to respond to other people's suffering empathically and compassionately?
  - a. Does the game stimulate our active emotions and imagination?
  - b. Does it help us to understand that others are different (e.g. religion, gender, and origin) and to understand their difference?
  - c. Does it help us to understand that others are similar, vulnerable beings?
- (2) Does the game stimulate our development as citizens of the world?
  - a. Does the game help us to concern us with the good of other people who are different from ourselves?
  - b. Does it help us to see that they share many problems with us?
  - c. Can it make the life of different others comprehensible to us?
  - d. Does it give a voice to outcast or oppressed people?
  - e. Does it promote the desire for justice? f. Does it enhance our capacity for openness and responsiveness?
    - g. Does it make us feel and think of ourselves as citizens of the world?

h. Does it make us recognise that we have a shared future?

i. Does it make us recognise that we are a community of human beings? We must also consider the criteria the novelist Barbara Kingsolver proposes in her essays in *High Tide in Tucson*.<sup>45</sup> Like Nussbaum, she writes about novels but we can use her work provided we adapt it to the specific characteristics of computer games as outlined above. But Kingsolver asks the question from the point of view of the writer: Why 'invent violence that didn't really happen'<sup>46</sup> for the sake of entertainment? Kingsolver takes a well-considered position in this debate. She does not claim that all violence in fiction should be banned. The moral problem, rather, is twofold. First, too much violence may make us numb, so that we are no longer able to exercise empathy. This is already a problem with non-fiction, for example TV news. As Kingsolver puts it:

Confronted with knowledge of dozens of apparently random disasters each day, what can a human heart do but slam its doors? No moral can grieve that much. We didn't evolve to cope with tragedy on a global scale. [...] It's a practical strategy, to some ends, but the loss of empathy is also the loss of humanity, and that's no small tradeoff.<sup>47</sup> With regard to computer games, I infer that if it is already so difficult to train empathy for people in the real world, it is even harder in a game. But it makes the need to train empathy all the more urgent. If we are made numb by TV, we need to train our empathetic moral sensitivities. Kingsolver recommends fiction to do that. Second, and most importantly, Kingsolver points to those works of fiction that show violent acts without showing the consequences. If we are simply exposed to violent acts without making the causal link with painful consequences, we will tend to believe that this is how the world is, since we know from research in social psychology that 'we learn about the world through our senses' (254). Therefore Kingsolver proposes the following criterion: violent acts in fiction 'must be embedded in the story of its consequences' (255). She refers to the great tragedy plays of the past (for example Shakespeare), that fulfil this condition brilliantly. Applied to computer

<sup>45</sup> B. Kingsolver. *High Tide in Tucson*. New York, HarperCollins. 1995.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 231–232.

games, this argument becomes a pertinent objection. The computer games under consideration do not make you sense the full tragedy of human suffering, including suffering caused by violence. If you kill someone in *GTA* or in *Manhunt*, there is no trajectory of suffering, and there is no space for empathy. On the contrary, you learn to interpret signals of suffering as signs that you're doing well in the game. Thus, frequent exposure to violence which is not linked to its painful consequences is dangerous if it influences perception of the real world. And such influence becomes more likely if the world of the game increasingly resembles the real world. We want people to become aware of human narratives, human tragedy, and human vulnerability. Computer games do not manage to represent human suffering. In this sense too, and not only in the Kantian sense of disrespect for persons as ends, violent computer games may dehumanise. In sum, Kingsolver offers the following criteria which we can apply to computer games design: (1) show consequences of actions for *human* suffering, and (2) avoid numbness on the part of the player (we get too much of it, too much violence). For example, many players even feel that *Manhunt* offers simply too much of it. Note that these criteria, like Kingsolver's, neither require us to abandon all violence in computer games, nor demand games to be straightforwardly moralising. Of course we may consider games in which one performs good acts, such as games "in which the player is repeatedly put in situations where he or she saves virtual people from drowning, helps elderly virtual ladies across the street, or improves the situations in virtual prisoner-of-war camps around the world," as Per Sandin suggests in his response to McCormick's arguments.<sup>48</sup> But the account I sketched above does not require us to restrict ourselves to such games. Note also that the 'consequences' criterion relates back to the structural features of computer games discussed above, which allows us more specific recommendations. As Brey has argued, designers determine (1) what actions can be performed (e.g. cruel killing), (2) how actions and their consequences are represented, and (3) what behaviour is stimulated.<sup>49</sup> Kingsolver's point concerns the representation of

consequences: applied to computer games, it demands that if designers permit violent actions at all, they should suggest within the game *human* suffering as a consequence of these violent acts. This may include the requirement that suffering be part of a personal narrative that is a *human* narrative. This can be part of what Brey calls the requirement of designers "to inform users of the consequences of their actions when performed in the real world".<sup>50</sup> Often soaps on TV achieve this better than computer games, so it is certainly possible.<sup>51</sup> Surely not all games that are morally acceptable need to be good games in terms of empathy, cosmopolitanism, and other criteria proposed here. But such a cosmopolitan project, if endorsed, can give us good reasons to discourage the development and use of certain games. Such reasons can include general worries about violence, but are stronger if they (1) indicate what exactly it is in the computer game that is morally problematic, taking into account the specific features of computer games in general and the game in question in particular, and if they (2) show how the game involves a training that goes contrary to the aims of moral development (of young people as well as adults), which I here, with Nussbaum and Kingsolver, understood in terms of empathy and cosmopolitanism. Moreover, the positive project also gives some more guidance with regard to judging the world we live in, the world of which games are a part. Those who shout hard at violent computer games but continue to support the structures that continue to make our world unjust and divided, are inconsistent. We can imagine games (and other mass media such as TV) that show not only violent actions as 'events' but also the long-term consequences of violent actions for the suffering of people, and especially the relations between violence, on the one hand, and social, political, and economical structures, on the other hand. Virtual violence, by itself, need not be immoral. But the specific kind of training provided by violent computer games is at least morally problematic since it fails to satisfy the criteria proposed here, and this is a good reason to discourage their design and use.

<sup>48</sup> P. Sandin. Virtual Child Pornography and Utilitarianism. *Journal of Information, Communication & Ethics in Society* 2(4): 217–223, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> P. Brey. The Ethics of Representation and Action in Virtual Reality. *Ethics and Information Technology* 1: 5–14, 1999, p. 10.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> I wonder if gender differences in the target audience may play a role here? It is often argued that computer games are mainly directed to males who are supposed to enjoy the sort of possibilities for violent virtual action offered to them. This raises further questions for research.

### Some remaining problems

It may be objected that a character-based account is equally vulnerable to the causality problem: it assumes an empirical connection between playing (certain) violent games and (a particular person's) character development. I acknowledge that this remains a problem, that the character-based account also rests on an empirical assumption about a causal link, but I doubt if it is *equally* vulnerable to the causality problem. Let me explain why I think that I have a more plausible way of clarifying our intuitions about the matter than those who suppose a direct causal link between playing a certain game and committing a certain act. Character development is a continuous, inescapable process. Whereas it is possible not to act on game-stimulated aggressive feelings when entering the real world, thus distinguishing sharply between virtuality and reality, we cannot leave our character on the doorstep when we enter the world of the game. Our (real) character is always there. Moreover, it is not merely a canvass on which what we see and what we do is imprinted, it is also itself part of the glasses through which we perceive and act. There is no reason to suppose that this is different in the case of gaming: it makes sense to say that our character is both the *object* of potential influences from the game and *mediator* in our relation to the game character, game actions, and game features. And if our relation to the game is always at least partly mediated by our character, an empirical claim about a causal connection between real character and game character seems more plausible. There is already a connection in the way we relate to the game. To get from game to act, by contrast, requires more work. In the first approach, the contamination metaphor is less suitable, since there are no entirely separate entities that can make contact, there is already an established, prior connection, whereas in the latter approach an account is needed that explains how the 'violence virus' travels all the way from virtual reality to reality.

Another possible objection (which I only briefly touched upon above) is that not every medium and not every game has to stimulate moral character development, including empathy and cosmopolitan attitudes. For example, if we do not require a (real) football game to stimulate empathy and cosmopolitanism, why ask it from computer games? Let me consider two points in response to this objection. First, it is not my claim that all of us should always play games that enhance empathetic and cosmopolitan moral development. Rather, the account sketched here offers a suitable vocabulary in which we can express our moral worries about violent computer

games, good reasons to discourage the development and use of such games, and good reasons to stimulate the development and use of empathy-enhancing games. Further arguments are needed if to make stronger claims. Second, the question concerning the focus of the moral controversy on computer games and not football or other games is that *computer* gaming has become a significant activity in the life of children and young people. In my discussion so far I have not differentiated between various categories of players, but it is wise to do so. If those people who are in important phases of their moral development, such as children and adolescents, are also the ones who play computer games most frequently and play for many hours each day, directing our moral attention to violent computer games and children is justified and urgent. Surely, this argument does not justify an exclusive focus on computer games. In so far as other games too involve violence (in the game or in the context of the game) and take up an important part of the life of young people, we have reasons to worry and to discuss problems with these games as well. And *if* our aim is to stimulate moral development, developing and playing games that contribute to that aim are to be recommended. But other games require a separate analysis, taking into account the specific features and context of the game.

In a similar vein, it should be noted that my proposal to look at the interaction between content and medium does not imply that we should restrict the discussion to computer games. If Bolter and Grusin are right that every medium also remediates other media, it should not surprise us that we can find in this and other discussions similarities with arguments made in relation to TV, film, books, etcetera.<sup>52</sup> The task then is not to shift all attention from content to medium, but rather to pay attention to similarities as well as differences with other media. For example, my use of Nussbaum and Kingsolver rested on assumed similarities between computer games and novels, but we should also further study how specific features of games such as immersive virtual reality and interactivity render the transfer from arguments about one medium (books) to arguments about another medium (computer games) problematic.

Finally, one need not be a consequentialist to admit that the potential benefits of games must be considered when discussing violent computer games. Benefits may include fun, exploration of identity, and learning cognitive skills. If the tendency of violent computer games to un-train or inhibit empathetic and cosmopolitan moral development were shown to be

<sup>52</sup> J.D. Bolter and R. Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA/London.

very small in comparison to the benefits, then perhaps we need not worry that much. However, views differ as to whether and to what extent such benefits should count when judging the *moral* quality of games. In other words, the discussion between consequentialism and deontological views resurfaces and cannot be avoided entirely by a character-approach.

## Conclusion

Are the arguments made here sufficient to ban violent videogames such as *GTA* and *Manhunt*? This question cannot be decided on account of the previous discussion alone.

First, let me clarify what I have done here. Inspired by McCormick's arguments, I sketched a character-based account that provides an alternative language to express our moral intuitions about what is wrong with computer games, an account that can assist us in evaluating the moral quality of computer games. I proposed several shifts in attention when discussing ethics of violent computer games: from content to content *and* medium, from external to internal structure (person perspective, interactivity, anonymity, immersion, etc.), from general norms to specific criteria related to these structural characteristics and to empathy, and from anti-gaming to a positive moral-educational project inspired by Nussbaum's version of empathetic morality and the cosmopolitan ideal. Thus, to argue against violent computer games was not my primary aim.

That being said, my arguments constitute good reasons to discourage the development and use of violent computer games, provided that they have certain structural and internal characteristics that interact with and enhance violent content, and inhibit the training and development of an empathetic and cosmopolitan personality. I have offered some criteria that can be used in this evaluation, which can be used by designers, parents, and policy makers. For example, they may want to avoid games that involve virtual violence without human suffering, games that train us to treat others as alien objects that are not in any way like us, and games that encourage divisions and conflict between people belonging to different nations. However, even if some violent computer games do not satisfy these moral standards, this does not necessarily justify banning them. As mentioned in my discussion of objections, moral development is not the only aim of games, and we must also consider potential benefits. Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between questions of legal action and moral judgment. In terms of moral judgment, I believe the criteria provided in this paper constitute

good reasons to see violent video games such as *GTA* and *Manhunt* as morally dangerous and to discourage their use. However, it is an entirely different matter if, and how, such a moral judgment should be translated in legal action. There are several other measures thinkable. In the first instance, these criteria can be used at the stage of game design. Since the analysis above provides a more detailed argument than the general one that violent computer games cause violent behaviour, this is possible. And I believe that if game designers are informed about the exact features of their games that make them morally problematic, they are more likely to do something about it than if they and their game are simply subjected to the ban curses of an anti-gaming mob. And apart from assisting responsible self-regulation, which arguably should be the preferred mode of regulation in a democratic society, it may be desirable to use legal measures as well. In that case a more refined analysis can also assist responsible law making and jurisdiction. But whether or not legal action to enforce rather than stimulate or discourage behaviour is the best route, and what kind of legal action should be taken, is a different matter.

Note that someone may be unwilling to endorse the Nussbaumian moral project that inspires this paper. Although it was not my aim to defend (or criticise) Nussbaum as such, I have applied some of her ideas to computer games. I believe it is possible and reasonable to use other moral theories, or a combination of them. But such a move must face the challenges discussed in this article, such as accounting for the specificity of computer games and avoiding the three difficulties listed in the beginning of my article. Moreover, the criteria in relation to empathy and cosmopolitanism are likely to complement, not contradict, the results of other approaches in moral theory. We must welcome all efforts that contribute to a discussion of computer games that testifies of the plurality and complexity of computer games and their many moral shades and colours.

Finally, given its empirical assumption the account sketched here is incomplete. In particular, empirical research is needed to elaborate the exact relation between violent games and moral development in terms of empathy and cosmopolitanism. This discussion with its focus on empathy, including my response to the causality objection above, may inspire the conceptual framework of such research.

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