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ORIGINAL PAPER

# Value, violence, and the ethics of gaming

**Michael Goerger**[1]

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**Abstract** I argue for two theses. First, many arguments against violent gaming rely on what I call the *contamination thesis*, drawing their conclusions by claiming that violent gaming contaminates real world interactions. I argue that this thesis is empirically and philosophically problematic. Second, I argue that rejecting the contamination thesis does not entail that all video games are morally unobjectionable. The violence within a game can be evaluated in terms of the values the game cultivates, reinforces, denigrates, or disrespects. Games which present violence in ways that disrespect objects of values are more objectionable than violent games that reinforce or cultivate those values. The resulting analysis evaluates games on a case-by-case basis and pays particular attention to the representational context of the violence.

**Keywords** Violent video games · Virtue · Value · Violence · Gaming

## Introduction

Most arguments against violent video gaming draw their conclusions by claiming that violent gameplay negatively impacts ordinary interpersonal relations. Many seem to think that absent such a claim, there is no effective way to argue against violent gameplay (e.g., Schulzke 2010). I call this claim the *contamination thesis*, and I argue in this essay that it is neither as powerful nor as compelling as is commonly assumed. Unless the thesis is significantly strengthened both philosophically and empirically other lines of argument should be pursued. That said, after diffusing the thesis I maintain that some forms of violent gameplay are morally problematic independently of any effects on ordinary behavior.

My aim in this essay is to show that violent gaming can be morally inappropriate even if gaming causes no harm, real or hypothetical, to any person. The debate over violent gaming tends to focus on violent imagery and the effects of gameplay on the player. Yet, both foci are illusory in their importance to debates about violent gaming. I argue that in order to accurately evaluate the morality of gameplay, we must consider the ways in which specific games integrate violence. If one focuses only on visual representations of violence, one fails to recognize substantial differences between individual games. Some games with less graphic imagery (e.g., *Grand Theft Auto V*) raise greater moral concerns, I argue, than considerably more violent games (e.g., *The Last of Us*). By evaluating games individually we see that the moral content of a game is determined by the representation of violence and value within the game.

I begin with an overview of violent gaming as well as a discussion of the contamination thesis. Then, following Coeckelbergh (2007) and Schulzke (2010), I argue that the contamination thesis is not as compelling as it appears to be. In light of these problems, I focus my discussion on violent gameplay itself and evaluate gaming independently of the contamination thesis. Gaming, I argue, is a form of entertainment and must be evaluated as such. I utilize off-color humor (another suspect form of entertainment) as an example to illustrate ethical differences in games otherwise similar in violent content. Finally, I discuss two games in depth, *Grand Theft Auto V* and *The Last of Us*, in order to illustrate my method of analysis. I conclude that

Michael Goerger
GoergerM@cwu.edu

[1] Central Washington University, Ellensburg, USA

the morality of a given game is determined by its content, including the values represented in gameplay and the social context of the violence portrayed.

## Violence in video games

Violent content has been present in video games for decades (Wonderly 2008), but the debate over in-game violence intensified when *Mortal Kombat*, a third-person fighting game, and *Doom*, a first-person shooter, were released in 1992 and 1993 respectively. In *Mortal Kombat*, players engage in single combat against a human or non-human opponent. The game includes "finishing moves" with which players can disembowel, decapitate, or incinerate an opponent. In *Doom*, players run through a series of dungeons infested by demons escaped from hell. Large caliber rifles, rocket launchers, and other weapons are used to blow opponents to pieces. Both games involve visible bloodshed and quickly attracted the attention of concerned parents, social critics, and politicians.

Both games were also enormously popular, demonstrating to game designers that violence sells. *Mortal Kombat* and *Doom* were the vanguard in a home entertainment revolution, with increasingly violent titles to follow. A growing media storm connected violent games to increases in crime among juveniles, fueled the fears of parents, and led Senator Joseph Lieberman to hold hearings in the US Congress. The debate has waxed and waned in intensity ever since.

Opponents argue that in-game violence infests and contaminates the minds of players, deadening them to ordinary human suffering and amplifying their inherent aggression (McCormick 2001; Waddington 2007; Wonderly 2008). A recent meta-analysis released by the American Psychological Association (2015) provoked a new volley of arguments against violent games, increasing calls to police or censor their content. Against these claims others argue that video games are harmless, often claiming that empirical links between gaming and aggression are exaggerated or methodologically suspect (Madigan 2016, pp 223–238; Schulzke 2010; Kutner and Olson 2008). Some even claim that gaming is beneficial to players and might strengthen their ability to engage in ethical decision making (Madigan 2016, pp 241–254; Grizzard et al. 2014; Eden et al. 2014). Violent gaming might be *distasteful* or *immature*, proponents argue, but absent any clear link to violent behavior, it is not morally problematic.

Three elements of video game violence have intensified since the early 1990s and are frequently cited by opponents:

### Realism

Advanced processing capabilities allow for increasingly realistic depictions of violence. In the most recent iteration of *Doom* (2016) the pixelated sprites that infested the dungeons of 1993 have been replaced with hyper-realistic renderings of demons and human beings. The stunning realism of video games often impresses and shocks non-players. Eighth-generation consoles (PlayStation 4 and Xbox One) are roughly ten times more powerful than consoles available just 5 years ago, and the depictions of violence that provoked a congressional investigation in 1993 pale in comparison to the realistic depictions found in contemporary games.

### Graphicness

Contemporary games are also bloodier and gorier than earlier games. These developments do not always track the increasing realism of the representations because in many violent games opponents are fictional beings such as zombies and aliens. In the horror genre, where a premium is placed on gross-out content and shock value, the increase in graphic violence is particularly disturbing. Opponents are blown to bits with shotgun blasts, hacked to death, gutted, and eaten by animals. Imaginative fictional weaponry allows for new modes of killing, many of which are unrealistic or impossible in real life.

### Gameplay

In many contemporary games players cannot successfully play the game without engaging in simulated violence. Again, this feature need not track the realism or graphicness of the game. For example, *Grand Theft Auto V*, one of the most derided games currently available, can be played while committing very little violence.[1] However, many of today's AAA or "blockbuster" games require players to participate in violence as a condition of demonstrating skills and winning the game. The "first-person shooter" genre, as the name suggests, focuses entirely on killing opponents. You simply cannot play a game like *Call of Duty: Black Ops III* (2015) or *Halo 5* (2015) without simulating killing; killing is the point of the game.

The sheer ubiquity of video games provides a reason to reflect on the morality of violent gaming. As an applied ethical issue, video gaming impacts over half of American

[1] This is not to say that playing *GTA* in this fashion is easy. Jeremy Mattheis, the "*Grand Theft Auto* Pacifist" must frequently find or invent ways to complete game objectives without engaging in criminal activity. See Lyne (2014) for more information.

households and often involves vulnerable segments of the population. While the average gamer is now 34—those kids who bought *Mortal Kombat* in 1992 are still mashing buttons today - under-age gamers are a crucial part of the video game market (Campbell 2015). For children of middle to upper socio-economic status, owning a Playstation 4 or Xbox One is almost as normal as having a television. Given that so many individuals are exposed to simulated violence in video games, it is important to develop an adequate framework through which gameplay, especially violent gameplay, can be evaluated.

## The contamination thesis

Confronted with screenshots of violent video games, it is difficult to reject the intuition that violent gaming is morally questionable, and it is not surprising that concerns about violent gaming repeatedly arise in popular media. Certainly there is something worrisome about a group of players—old or young—laughing gleefully while beautifully rendered human beings are burned to death by a Molotov cocktail. Graphic bloodshed, the sounds of breaking bones and snapping necks, even the occasional decapitation all fail to disturb most players. In one game shotgun blasts dismember opponents whose bodies splash against walls. In another blood spews from the neck of an opponent stabbed with a well-crafted shiv. Though many have objected, very little progress has been made toward establishing clear conclusions about violent gaming.

Key to nearly all arguments against violent video games is a premise that I call the *contamination thesis*. Though it has many forms, the contamination thesis states that violent gameplay has a direct and pernicious impact on real life behavior. These arguments thus claim that while gameplay *itself* is not morally problematic (most obviously because no real human beings are harmed while playing), gameplay is morally problematic because it contaminates the behavior or character of the player. My aim in this section and the following is to call into question the contamination thesis. I hope to show that the thesis, if utilized at all, must be substantially strengthened in order to draw ethical conclusions about gaming.

In the existing literature, the contamination thesis has been employed in both consequentialist and virtue-based arguments. Broadly speaking, consequentialists evaluate the morality of a given action or policy by considering the long and short-term consequences of that action or policy. If the net effect of the action or policy is an increase in harm or pain, then a consequentialist will conclude that the act or policy is wrong. For example, Singer (2007), a prominent consequentialist, claims that violent gaming increases the risk that players will perform violent acts outside of the game world. While he admits that the empirical research is in some ways wanting, he argues that the mere risk of violence is too great to ignore. Thus, we should discourage violent gaming, alter laws to allow victims of violent crimes to sue game developers, and possibly ban certain titles. The net result of violent gaming, he argues, is an increase in overall harms to the community, and consequentialists hold that any such action or policy is wrong. While Singer's argument is an oversimplification—he doesn't consider many benefits that attend violent gameplay - the argument is representative of the consequentialist form of reasoning.[2]

Not all philosophers appeal directly to negative consequences to argue against violent gaming. Many have utilized virtue ethics, as I later will, in order to evaluate the morality of gaming. Virtue ethics, most broadly understood, evaluates the morality of an action by looking to the character of the agent. Telling a lie is wrong, for example, because dishonesty is a vice. One way to evaluate a practice, then, is to ask if it cultivates a virtuous or vicious character. Practices which degrade one's character are condemned, while those practices which cultivate a virtuous character are praised (Hursthouse 1999; Foot 2001). If violent gaming cultivates a vicious character, the practice will be condemned.

Several philosophers employ this line of argument (Bartel 2015; McCormick 2001; Sicart 2009). Wonderly (2008), for example, argues that violent gaming diminishes one's empathetic functioning. She then argues that diminished empathetic functioning is morally problematic because, following the work of David Hume, empathy guides moral deliberation. She concludes that violent gaming impairs the player's moral reasoning because it diminishes her empathetic abilities. Notice that Wonderly does not claim that violent gaming is in *itself* wrong. Instead, violent gaming is problematic because it negatively impacts the character of the player. In this way, Wonderly is clearly drawing on the virtue tradition.

However, at the heart of Wonderly's argument we again find the contamination thesis. Rather than claim that diminished empathetic functioning is itself a character flaw (i.e., vicious), Wonderly appeals to the consequences of possessing this trait. For this reason Wonderly provides empirical support for her central claim. She cites studies that suggest that empathy is in fact diminished by violent gaming. As I will show, the relevance of these studies is difficult to ascertain and the data admits of multiple interpretations

[2] See Waddington (2007, 122–24). Singer's article is short and was published in a non-scholarly venue. The lack of nuance in the argument reflects the publication venue rather than Singer's skills as a philosopher.

(Schulzke 2010; Kutner and Olson 2008). However, for my purposes it is only necessary to demonstrate that arguments of this form, though not consequentialist in nature, employ the contamination thesis. The argument is sound only if we establish that actions in one domain—that of gameplay—have negative consequences in another domain—that of ordinary interpersonal interaction. Absent any established link between gaming and the behavior of the gamer, violent gaming is not morally problematic on these accounts.

The contamination thesis is found at the heart of many arguments against violent gaming and evaluating its truth (empirically) and its role in moral arguments (philosophically) is crucial. In order for the argument to succeed, it must be the case that playing violent video games has an impact on the player's character or behavior. Thus, the soundness of the argument rests on whether these empirical claims withstand scrutiny. Further, the way in which the thesis relocates the wrong-making features of gaming, even among non-consequentialists, must be examined. In the following section, I argue that the contamination thesis is problematic and should either be significantly strengthened or abandoned.

## Against the contamination thesis

The contamination thesis is problematic for two reasons. First, the thesis relies on a body of empirical research that is notoriously vague in its conclusions. Second, as articulated the contamination thesis often relies on a problematic form of consequence-based reasoning which obscures our understanding of the morality of gaming.

### Empirical concerns

Empirical studies are often used to support the claim that violent gaming contaminates behavior outside of the game world. These studies, however, are difficult to interpret; a sentiment echoed by the American Psychological Association's (2015) Task Force on Violence in the Media. While it is quite clear that violent gameplay has an impact on *measures* of aggression, it is not clear that high scores on these measures correlate with aggression outside of the laboratory. Indeed, the most recent meta-analysis by the APA finds that while violent gameplay is quite consistently correlated with measures of aggression, no study has yet established a link between violent gameplay and criminality, violence, or delinquency. This inconsistency may be due to two factors which impact this body of research.

First, the research might suffer from problems with construct validity. That is, common measures of aggression may, in fact, fail to measure aggression (i.e., the measures or scales may lack validity). For example, a common measure of aggression measures how long a participant blows an air horn at an opponent after playing a violent game. One is asked to trust that this laboratory measure is meaningful and valid because it has not been empirically validated (Kutner and Olson 2008). Second, even if common measures of aggression are valid, the research may suffer from problems with significance. Arriving at a statistically significant result does not necessarily mean that the effect is large enough to be practically significant. That is, just because one scores higher on a test of aggression in a laboratory does not mean that those effects will be observable outside of the laboratory context. Thus, it remains unclear if the impacts of violent gaming on the gamer are real and / or strong enough to 'contaminate' ordinary interpersonal relationships. In any case, the gap between laboratory measures, which show increases in aggression, and studies of outside behavior, which do not show increases in aggressive behavior, suggests that something is amiss.

While not unique to violent gaming, the above problems are particularly salient when studying aggression. On the one hand, measuring whether participants become aggressive is difficult if not impossible because of ethical constraints on research. Provoking participants into aggressive and possibly violent behavior impacts both the target of the violence and has psychological ramifications for the participant. On the other hand, correlative studies of violent gameplay and aggressive behavior encounter problems with confounding variables. Violent games are so ubiquitous and players are so diverse that it is difficult to control for many other factors that impact aggressive behavior. Thus, the above problems are due to real constraints on this kind of research.

Inconsistencies in the empirical conclusions must be resolved if the empirical conclusions are to support arguments against violent gaming. While skepticism about the interpretation and validity of this research is not enough to fully discredit arguments which rely on the contamination thesis, it does suggest a more cautious approach. Any empirical claims employed to defend the contamination thesis must be strongly supported before these conclusions are taken seriously.

### Philosophical concerns

I will now argue that the contamination thesis in its current form is not philosophically compelling because the thesis says nothing about gaming itself but locates the wrongness of gaming entirely in consequences. Even if the empirical

concerns are set aside, the thesis focuses our attention almost entirely on the consequences of gaming, sometimes in fairly subtle ways.[3]

As already noted, the thesis lends itself most obviously to consequentialist reasoning. For these arguments to be successful, however, the authors must show that the negative consequences of gaming outweigh any positive consequences, and gaming has many non-trivial benefits. To name a few, blockbuster games earn hundreds of millions of dollars and opening weekend sales top ticket sales for major motion pictures; the ongoing interest in gaming, including violent games, has led to advances not just in gaming consoles, but in other areas of computing; gamers derive a significant amount of enjoyment from playing games; and finally there is evidence that gaming, even violent gaming, enables young people to develop social skills and hand–eye coordination (Granic et al. 2014). A sophisticated consequentialist argument must weigh all of these benefits against any increase in violence or aggression.

Even non-consequentialists tend to utilize some form of the contamination thesis to support their claims. The thesis, remember, locates the wrongness of violent gaming in the impact it has on behavior or character. Thus, even an argument rooted in virtue ethics might utilize the thesis. Wonderly (2008), for example, links the possession of an unempathetic character traits to attitudes that may result in behavioral changes (8). She seems to locate the wrongness of gaming not in the character trait itself (the vice), but in the consequences of possessing that trait (the effects of the vice). While the difference is subtle, it reflects a substantial difference in the structure of the argument being made (Watson 1990). In a more robust form, a consequence-based articulation of virtue ethics might be compelling (e.g., Swanton 2003), but without further development Wonderly's account leaves one wondering whether violent gaming is wrong because it cultivates vicious character traits or because those character traits lead to harmful behavior.

The point of these brief reflections is not to show that the contamination thesis is necessarily *false*. Instead I mean to highlight the need for sophistication in the employment of the thesis. Because the thesis appeals to the consequences of gaming, it raises concerns about how those consequences are measured and about the explanatory role those consequences play in the conclusions drawn. The argument I present below, to contrast, is rooted in the virtue ethics tradition but makes no appeal to the consequences of gaming. The argument appeals only to the values articulated in gameplay itself.

[3] A Kantian argument could avoid the concerns I raise here. The simulated nature of violent acts in a game presents problems for Kantians, and few have developed robust Kantian arguments against violent gaming. As a full discussion would take my argument far off course, I refer the reader to McCormick (2001), Waddington (2007), and Schulzke (2010).

## Gaming and amusement

Any analysis of violent gaming immediately confronts the problem of defining the action or actions of those who game because players are not actually killing, maiming, or dismembering opponents. While these actions may be simulated, at no point does the player *perform* them. I focus, instead, on the fact that when one plays a game, violent or non-violent, digital or analogue, one plays in order to be entertained. Thus, violent gaming is different from real life violence. With only a few exceptions (e.g., sexual sadism), violent actions are performed in order to harm others. Gamers need not have this motive; indeed it is unclear if gamers can intelligibly have this motive. Instead, they are primarily moved by the entertainment value of the game and simulated violence provides this entertainment. I will thus approach the complicated question of the morality of violent gaming by considering whether or not it is appropriate to derive entertainment from simulated violence.

In order to understand when, if ever, it is inappropriate to be amused by violent games, I will briefly consider the morality of finding amusement in off-color humor. This strategy has been pursued by at least one other author with an interest in the morality of virtual 'actions' (Patridge 2013). While it may seem strange to draw analogies between violent gaming and off-color humor, both involve finding amusement in questionable content, and further, both are often regarded as morally inappropriate even if no one is harmed. Thus both violent gaming and off-color humor involve behavior that is morally suspect independently of concerns about harm.

My strategy is as follows. First, I will briefly consider why it is wrong to laugh at some jokes. I argue that laughter in these cases is problematic because the laughter demonstrates a lack of respect for objects of value. This analysis is consistent, I believe, with observations from virtue ethics and the literature on valuing. I then discuss violent gaming. I provide an in-depth analysis of two games in order to show why playing one game (*Grand Theft Auto V*) is morally problematic while another equally violent game (*The Last of Us*) is morally benign.

## The ethics of amusement

Consider a paradigmatic example of off-color humor: A rape joke. There is a lively debate among comedians about the permissibility of these jokes and whether they should

be laughed at.[4] While disagreement exists, the general consensus is that telling rape jokes or laughing at them is morally problematic unless the joke criticizes rape culture. Joking about rape itself is verboten, and even jokes that criticize cultural attitudes toward rape and sexual violence are controversial. For my limited purposes, let us assume that comedians should not joke about rape, even if it would garner a laugh, and that no one should laugh at a rape joke, even if it is humorous.

It is not immediately clear why off-color humor is morally problematic. One might appeal to the logic of humor and say something like, "Rape jokes are not funny," but this answer is insufficient because the claim has little ethical import. Many jokes, perhaps most jokes, are not funny, yet these jokes do not draw condemnation. It simply is not the case that it is *morally* problematic to laugh at or tell a joke that is not funny. The moral opprobrium directed at rape jokes, then, is not a response to the fit between the content of the joke and standards of humor. Instead, when one condemns a rape joke, one is making a normative claim: One ought not to laugh regardless of whether the joke is humorous.

A more compelling explanation would appeal to the fact that rape jokes are harmful, especially to survivors of sexual assault (c.f. Smuts 2010). This explanation is also problematic, because such jokes do not *necessarily* harm any real person. Imagine that my favorite pastime is to sit alone in my office and watch videos of comedians making rape jokes. This 'hobby' would be disturbing and many would claim that it is morally problematic (i.e., a hobby one ought not to have), but one could not appeal to disrespect toward real victims to ground this claim. No actual person is being disrespected, not directly at least, when I view the material alone. If one then tries to argue that my private amusement *contaminates* my interactions with real persons, the argument will be susceptible to the concerns raised above. More importantly, an appeal to the contamination thesis fails to explain why the joke is morally problematic; it simply attempts to link the joke to other problematic harmful behavior.

Consider, then, a third option. In an early paper, virtue ethicist Phillipa Foot (2002) argues that an agent can be faulted for possessing the wrong values and then claims that many vices involve this kind of mistake. She writes, "There is always an element of false judgment about these vices. it is [the agent's] values that are the subject of his criticism (7)." One who values worldly success over the goods of family life, Foot argues, possesses a flawed character because he "has false values (7)." On this kind of account, having the correct values and organizing one's dispositions around them plays a central role in what it means to possess a virtuous character. Further, an agent's values can be 'false' even if possessing those values harms no one. For example, I may, as in Hume's example, prefer the destruction of the whole world to having an itch in my finger (Hume 1738, Bk. 2.3.3). My evaluative scheme in this case is problematic even if I never have an opportunity to reveal those values; I ought not to value my own comfort so highly.

One might thus argue that one reason why off-color humor is problematic is because laughing at a rape joke reveals that the agent incorrectly values the experiences of those who have survived sexual assault. That is to say that it fails to take sexual violence seriously.[5] Many other jokes and the stereotypes they trade on are similarly problematic because they disrespect the experiences and struggles of those whom they target. This analysis allows us to see the difference between 'bathroom' humor and more transgressive jokes. When one rolls one's eyes at a joke and, with a bemused smirk, says, "That's not funny," one probably means to say that the joke is childish or inappropriate for the context. Rape jokes do not merit this kind of response because there is almost no context in which sexual violence should be viewed with levity or a lack of seriousness. In such cases our condemnation of those who laugh at the jokes is sharpened because of the deficient or false valuing the laughter reveals.

Contrary to many who have approached this issue from the standpoint of virtue ethics, my argument does not claim that false values are only morally problematic when they result in harms to others. While one might argue that improperly valuing the experiences of a person or group only becomes morally problematic when someone is harmed, this argument would rely on the very thesis which I have rejected. Instead, I claim that the possession of false values is problematic absent harm to real persons.

Let me explain. First, to value something is to possess a set of attitudes and disposition with regard to that object which regulate one's actions (Anderson 1993; Seidman 2009). For example, if I value a clean local environment, I

[4] This debate became quite intense after Daniel Tosh joked about an audience member being gang-raped during a 2012 performance at the Laugh Factory. While Tosh immediately apologized for the joke, other comedians debated whether such jokes should be off-limits during comedy shows. See Pozner (2012), Bassist (2012) and Gupta (2013).

[5] This view is not, to my knowledge, represented by humor theorists. A similar point has been made by Roberts (1988) and Gaut (2007). The view I articulate here is consistent, in general outline at least, with Garcia (1996)'s account of why racism and racist remarks are morally problematic. Patridge (2011) explores similar themes in a discussion of virtual pornography. The central similarity between our accounts is that we both argue that the representational context of virtual content directly impacts normative evaluations of that content.

will be disposed to pick up pieces of paper that are blown out of my hands *and* I will regulate my conduct in accordance with that value. Second, correctly valuing experiences, ideals, and so forth, involves a relationship of fit between the disposition and valued object. That is, the object being valued should be *worthy* of the respect which valuing bestows (Raz 2001; Franklin 2013). On my reading of Foot, and similar arguments are found in nearly all contemporary virtue theories, wisdom consists in having the *right* values, dispositions, and traits.

If one fails to value things that ought to be valued, one makes a mistake that can be morally criticized. A person who has the wrong values is not unlike a man who has the wrong beliefs. Even if he never expresses his false beliefs, there is something problematic about his having them because his beliefs do not properly respond to considerations of truth. If this is intentional or indicates negligence on his part, he can be faulted for not examining and evaluating his beliefs. Similarly, a man who loves off-color humor may have something wrong with his character if his values are not sensitive to the right considerations. In both the case of believing and the case of valuing, one can get it wrong even if one never acts on the belief or value.

Thus, I do not think that one need act on one's dispositions in order for those dispositions to be morally problematic. Instead, the possession of false values is problematic *in itself*. The agent fails to respect what is worthy of respect, and this is problematic not just because these values will, more likely than not, lead one to make mistakes, but also because the proper relationship of fit does not hold between the disposition and its object.

## Evaluating video game violence

I have argued that finding amusement in some jokes demonstrates a defect in the character of the agent. This defect is made manifest in the fact that the agent laughs at or makes light of objects of value. Further, I have argued that playing video games is a form of amusement. Thus, just as we evaluate off-color jokes by considering whether the joke respects objects of value, we can evaluate violent games by considering whether the game demonstrates respect for objects of value (c.f. Sicart 2009; Patridge 2011). The best way to illustrate this claim is through an analysis of two particular games.

Both *Grand Theft Auto 5* (GTA) and *The Last of Us* are massively popular, violent games available for the current generation of consoles. These games do not differ significantly in terms of violent imagery, but do differ in the extent to which they have attracted the attention of critics. This difference in critical reception cannot be attributed to the popularity of the games, for each is a bestseller. Nor can it be attributed to differences in gameplay, for violence plays a crucial role in both games.[6] By comparing these games in detail, I will argue that what drives the differential evaluations is not the representations of violence itself, but the values manifested through that violence.

### Grand Theft Auto 5 (GTA)

*Grand Theft Auto 5* is one of the best-selling games for the current generation of home consoles. Players travel through a major metropolitan area resembling Los Angeles and commit crimes to earn money. Though the game contains graphic violence, that violence is fairly unsophisticated and is rarely integral to gameplay. Blood-shed, for example, is limited when compared to other games with the same ESRB rating. Still, a central plot element of the game requires committing crimes that involve drugs, alcohol, and vulnerable populations. These crimes are rarely punished, though unskilled play attracts police attention. Lastly, *GTA* features a large open world, meaning that players are free to behave as they wish when not completing missions and tasks. If one tires of hijacking cars, for example, one can perpetrate a mass shooting instead.

*GTA* has attracted considerable moral scrutiny and outrage. Many see the game as paradigmatic of the kind of entertainment that leads directly to violent crime and delinquency among young adults. The focus on *GTA* as a target of moral opprobrium is no doubt connected to its popularity; the *Grand Theft Auto* series is the third best-selling video game franchise in history. However, popularity alone cannot account for the rage directed at the game. The violence in *GTA* strikes many as particularly horrific, and any account of the morality of violent gaming must explain why *GTA* has attracted such ire given its fairly standard violent imagery.

### The Last of Us

*The Last of Us* is a popular game first released for PlayStation 3 and then remastered for and bundled with the PlayStation 4. A biological attack has turned much of the human population into zombies and players control a survivor named Joel. Joel must guide Ellie, a young girl who is immune to the toxin, to a medical facility where her blood can be used to develop a vaccine. Along the way, Joel meets many zombies, infected humans, and non-infected rivals against whom he must defend himself. His weapons include firearms, makeshift clubs, shivs, and bombs.

[6] Both games are, broadly speaking, shooters. In *Grand Theft Auto 5* players have the option of choosing either a first or third person perspective. *The Last of Us* is set in the third person.

*The Last of Us* falls within the horror genre, which is known for extremely graphic violence and "gross out" scenes which provide a shocking thrill and adrenaline rush. Thus, *The Last of Us* is extremely gory. According to the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (2016) the game contains "Intense Violence" and "Blood and Gore," including "screams of pain" and "decapitations and dismemberment." The cut scenes (short videos inserted into gameplay) are particularly graphic, in one case showing a kitchen that is being used to butcher human beings by a group of cannibals. All told, *The Last of Us* contains some of the most violent and graphic imagery currently available in a major, high budget game.

In *The Last of Us* we find an odd contrast with *GTA*. *The Last of Us* has met near universal acclaim and is considered a masterpiece by many gamers and critics. *Edge* magazine called it, "the most riveting, emotionally resonant, story-driven epic" in the current generation of games (Houghton 2014). Even critics of in-game violence continuously overlook *The Last of Us*, frequently calling the violence "necessary" because it underscores the fragility of the characters' world and the importance of the moral choices they face. One reviewer praises the "uncomfortable realism" of killing in the game, writing that, "watching a survivor fruitlessly swat at Joel's arms as he strangles him to death is disturbing, as is quickly shiving a man in his neck and listening to him gurgle some parting breaths as he collapses to the ground (Moriarty 2013)". Each death within the game, the reviewer argues, is costly and painful for the player, contrasting the moral realities of a post-apocalyptic world with those of the world we live in. All in all, many argue that *The Last of Us* forces players to engage in moral reflection and to confront the realities of the human condition in an unprecedented and compelling way.

Both *The Last of Us* and *Grand Theft Auto* contain violent imagery. However, the way in which violence is integrated into the narratives and the centrality of that violence to gameplay differs significantly. As noted, despite each having earned a "Mature" rating from the ESRB, they differ in critical reception. The latter is one of the most vilified video games in history while the former is one of the most praised. Interestingly, the former is graphically violent, often obsessively so, while supporters frequently point out that the latter can be played while committing almost no violence at all. Thus, any analysis based only in violent imagery will fail to account for any moral differences between these games.

Yet, there are good reasons for thinking that *GTA* is a morally problematic game, even if we set aside concerns about violent imagery. I believe that much of the moral opprobrium directed at the game reflects its problematic presentation of violence. The violence in *GTA* takes place in a city obviously modeled on Los Angeles, California (previous cities in the series have been based on Miami, New York, and London). Further, the violence in *GTA* is often related to drug crime and gang activity. To contrast, the violence in *The Last of Us* takes place in a fictional post-apocalyptic world and is a part of a complex story of survival.

This difference in contextual features, read in light of my brief analysis of humor, helps us to understand why *GTA* is reviled and *The Last of Us* is praised. Those who play *GTA* take amusement in realistic depictions of urban violence in a major American city. The game not only depicts drug and gang related violence, but it presents that violence in a largely consequence free environment. Further, this crime is 'real' in the sense that similar crimes and criminal enterprises currently control broad swaths of metropolitan areas like Los Angeles. A player thus derives entertainment from, and almost laughs at, the depiction of violence that impacts real lives. Finding amusement in this violence and making light of it indicates a defect in character. Players are, essentially, being entertained by the misery of others and are thus disrespecting objects of value.

On this analysis taking amusement in *GTA* is morally problematic. The entertainment provided is suspect both because of its content (the easy availability of civilian targets, focus on drug crimes, and lack of consequences) and because of the context in which the game is played (a nation plagued by urban violence). Were it the case that urban violence was a long-resolved problem, as the problems of the two World Wars are for most Americans, the game would not be problematic on this count. However, *GTA* is available today, and any moral evaluation of the game must consider the larger socio-political context in which it is played (c.f. Patridge 2011). When all of these considerations are brought together, they provide ample reason to think that deriving amusement from *GTA* reveals a defect of character. The game's values are either not aligned with what merits respect or they fail to manifest themselves.

Two observations support my analysis of *GTA*. First, many have defended *GTA*, though they have not done so by arguing that its violent imagery is benign. Instead, they argue that the game is a form of satire. The series, some claim, holds a mirror up to a society that condemns violence with one breath but reinforces with another the pursuit of wealth, celebrity, and power that undergirds much of that violence. Thus, they claim, the game does not poke fun at this social issue, but pokes fun at a society that cultivates these issues. The game uses various cultural tropes, drawing particularly on popular movies from the 1980s, to reinforce this satirical interpretation.

The only way to understand this defense it is to understand the evaluative concerns that undergird it. *GTA* may, proponents say, *seem* to make light of urban violence, but the game in fact draws attention to urban violence through

an incredibly popular platform. The response assumes that violent imagery is not the central problem in the game and makes no attempt to defend that imagery. Instead, proponents argue, the game does not undervalue objects that merit respect. The "satire defense" thus supports my analysis because it attempts to show that the game, though violent, is not making light of urban street crime.

Second, equally violent games which deal with the distant future or past rarely attract negative attention to the degree that games like *GTA* do. This is not an accident. Studies show that parents are far more concerned with gameplay that involves killing human beings (rather than aliens, zombies, etc.) with modern firearms (Kutner and Olson 2008, p. 184–185). *GTA* certainly fails on this count, but other popular games, like much of the *Call of Duty* series, generally involve conflicts set in the past or future. When games strike "too close to home," they quickly attract negative attention. Only one developer has crafted a first-person shooter inspired by the current US conflict in Iraq, and though *6 Days in Fallujah* was announced in 2009, it was never released (Associated Press 2009).

When in-game violence is representative of death and destruction that is actually taking place, even the gaming community takes steps to mitigate concerns about value. One mission in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* walks players through an airport massacre perpetrated by Russian terrorists. Aware that the mission would offend many players, the game developers treat it differently than any other mission in the game. Players are warned that the "No Russian" mission contains disturbing content; players are not required to participate in the violence; the mission is optional and players are allowed to skip it with no penalty; no score is calculated in the mission; and no trophies or achievements are available. Though *Call of Duty* is a game, this mission, the developers say, is not. Everything that makes a level a part of a game—scoring, achievements, and active participation—has been removed. This indicates to me at least an awareness both that the imagery would be offensive and that making terrorism into a game is morally problematic. The mission still attracted criticism, but the limitations placed on the mission demonstrate an attempt to present the content in a respectful way.[7]

The link between representations of violence and the morality of a game is further supported by comparing *GTA* and *The Last of Us*. Though graphically violent, the violence in *The Last of Us* is tied to a story of struggle and survival in a post-apocalyptic world. The violence is (a) generally directed toward zombies rather than human beings, and (b) is not making light of real struggles or experiences. This, I think, makes the game substantially different from *Grand Theft Auto 5*. In many ways, the violence in *The Last of Us* is akin to the violence in critically acclaimed television shows such as *The Sopranos* or *The Wire*. It is used to augment the moral issues and dilemmas expressed in the plot. Thus, I think that one reason why fewer individuals find the violence in *The Last of Us* objectionable is because contextual features of the game represent the violence in a way that reinforces rather than disrespects certain values.

Coeckleberghh (2007) argues that video games could be constructed to engage and cultivate the player's capacity for empathy and cosmopolitan thinking. Such games would, he argues, ameliorate many of the ethical concerns raised by violent gaming. *The Last of Us* is one such game. Repeatedly praised for its ability to engage players in deep moral dilemmas, the game forces the player to grapple with problems central to our humanity. The characters live lives that have been shattered by circumstance, and they grieve for the past as they try to survive in a new world. Players become immersed in the emotional world that Joel and Ellie inhabit and experience complex moral emotions as a result. Many online reviews describe the game as moving and life-changing.

*GTA* and *The Last of Us* engage players in significantly different ways, and these differences impact how the player derives entertainment from the media. Too intense a focus on violent imagery prevents us from seeing that many representational features of a game (the plot, representation of persons, whether there are consequences for violence, etc.,) must be incorporated into any analysis of the morality of that game (c.f. Sicart 2009). I hope my comparative analysis of two best-selling games has made it clear how such an analysis can take place. Games must be evaluated individually, and the violence must be evaluated within its representational context. Games which present violence in ways that denigrate or disrespect important values are more objectionable than games that reinforce or cultivate those values.

## Whose values?[8]

I have argued that violent video games should be evaluated on the basis of the values expressed in the game rather than on the basis of perceived harms or violent imagery alone. This raises an obvious concern about how values are

[7] I concede that the game developers may have failed to present the content respectfully. I only claim here that the limitations imposed on the mission demonstrate a concern with the mission content prior to the game's release. If game developers believed that violent imagery alone makes a game morally suspect, they would not have imposed these limitations.

[8] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer who helped me see the relevance and importance of these concerns.

identified and the relationship between value, game content, and culture. These are exceedingly complex issues confronted by any value-based argument and cannot be fully addressed here. Two points, however, are particularly relevant.

First, I have not argued that any game should be banned, and I think there is significant room for lively debate about particular titles. For example, *FarCry 4* takes place in a fictional Himalayan country and the story is based on the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Whether the game makes light of religious violence and on-going conflict in the region is open to debate. Players and critics should discuss the morality of *FarCry 4* and other titles, and I believe a value-based discussion of that issue is the most productive way to proceed. Indeed, I hope my conclusion will encourage discussions which treat in-game violence not as a monolithic phenomenon but as a feature unique to each game.

If my argument has one political implication it is that an adequate estimation of the morality of an individual title requires more knowledge about the title's content than is readily available. An accurate moral analysis must appreciate the fact that video games do not merely convey imagery to the user, but are sophisticated entertainment products with robust narratives. Players are often disturbed by game content (Bartel 2015; Tavinor 2009), and many would welcome information about the context and type of violence as well as a description of the imagery employed in the game. The ESRB and other rating agencies would do well to make this information more readily available to players and parents.[9]

Second, Patridge (2011) argues that some representational content has an "incorrigible social meaning." She considers a cartoon image of President Obama eating a watermelon, and argues that cultural and historical facts make it "very difficult for someone to use this kind of imagery in contemporary American culture in a way that avoids or undermines its racist meaning (308)." She goes on to argue that some imagery has a meaning that is "exceedingly difficult to overturn," and is rooted in "facts about a particular social reality (308)." Part of her point, I take it, is that meaning and value are not 'up to us' but are instead responsive to social context (c.f. Anderson 1993, 1–16 and 91–116). These cultural and historical facts cannot be avoided or ignored when evaluating game titles.

Game worlds represent various imagined realities, and the meaning of these imagined realities will shift over time. Games that once seemed benign may now strike us as extremely disrespectful while others that once seemed disrespectful might now seem benign.[10] A given game-world exists at a particular time and is responsive to facts about the social world during that time. It is for this reason that game content must be evaluated on a case-by-case and market-by-market basis. I think it is a strength of my argument that it reveals the interaction between game content, values, and social context. While doing so raises significant questions, I believe these new questions draw our attention to gaps in our understanding of violent media rather than deficiencies in the argument.

## Conclusion

Currently, the moral evaluation of video games both in academic and popular discussions primarily focuses on violent imagery. I have argued that a better and richer form of evaluation occurs when the content and context of that imagery is considered. These considerations are emphasized in many reviews of violent games, but rarely play a central role in the moral evaluation of gaming. Further, taking into account these considerations will result in an ethical analysis that captures the concerns articulated by those who play and purchase violent games. For example, Kutner and Olson (2008) studied whether ESRB ratings capture the actual concerns of parents. They found, in support of my argument, that parents are predominantly concerned with contextual features of in-game violence. They care, for instance, whether opponents are humans as opposed to aliens or zombies, and this weighs heavily on whether they think the game is appropriate for their children. The exact nature of the violence portrayed, its role in the story, and the values it expresses must be considered in order to produce an accurate analysis.

In conclusion, most existing arguments against violent gaming ground the wrongness of violent gaming in the effects gaming has on the player's behavior outside of the game world. Absent this claim, one might think that there is no way to analyze the morality of violent gaming. This is incorrect. Like any form of amusement, games can contain content that ought not to amuse or entertain one. Those who are critical of video games, I argue, would do well to state their objections in terms of specific problems with the content of a game and the values that are disrespected. Doing so would enable a livelier and more accurate discussion of game content.

[9] More detailed discussions of game content are featured on the ESRB website. Currently, however, these discussions rarely discuss how violence is integrated into game narratives, and the information is not printed on game packaging.

[10] The character Lara Croft has undergone such a transformation. Praised in 1996's *Tomb Raider*, that early version of the character now strikes many as personifying negative stereotypes about women. Contemporary (2013 and 2015) versions of Lara Croft have attempted to portray her as a heroine and role model and meet fewer criticisms.

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