VICE CITY
VIRTUE

Moral Issues in Digital Game Play

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Table of Contents

5 Virtue, Empathy, and Vulnerability

Evaluating Violence in Digital Games

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Introduction

Soldier of Fortune, God of War, Manhunt, Resident Evil, Postal, Grand Theft Auto, Mortal Kombat, ... the list of violent digital games is long. Players can chop their digital victims into pieces with a chainsaw, strangle them, burn them alive, run them over, and so on. An advertisement for violent flash games reads: 'we serve you the most violent, brutal, sadistic and bloody flash games on the internet'. They add the warning (in bold) 'Always keep in mind it's just digital violence.'[1]

Is it 'just' digital violence? Many people believe that even if the overwhelming majority of players do not engage in violent behaviour in the 'real' world, there is still something morally problematic about violence in digital games, in particular as they become more realistic. This worry is understandable. As McCormick has put it:

> 'It is hard to imagine how a person can frequently participate in brutal, graphic, and realistic acts of simulated violence and not be affected in some morally relevant sense' (McCormic, 2001, p. 227).

Concerns about violent digital games have inspired legal regulation – including bans – of digital games in many countries all over the world, especially since the

media regularly suggest that there is a relation between 'real' violence and playing violent digital games. But is this moral condemnation of digital games fair? What exactly *is* the effect of such games? Are gamers influenced by their games at all, and if so, how?

In this chapter I discuss three kinds of arguments that try to justify moral concerns about violence in digital games, which all have different ideas about what it is about digital games that is morally relevant and morally problematic.

The first, most common argument I will discusses proposes an 'external' criterion to evaluate violence in digital games: it evaluates games by a criterion that has nothing to do with the game play itself but only with its (alleged) effects in the 'real' world. In philosophical ethics, this is called a *consequentialist* argument: the moral evaluation of an action depends not on the moral quality of the act(s) itself, but on its consequences. The challenge for people who go with this line of argument is to show that there is a causal connection between digital violence and real-world violence. But can such a causal link be established? And if not, does that necessarily imply that the initial intuition about is false?

Elaborating previous work on this issue (McCormick, 2001; Coeckelbergh, 2007a), I then show that a different kind of justification of the intuition can be provided by drawing on philosophical accounts of moral emotions and virtue. Here we enter the tradition of *virtue ethics* and neo-Aristotelian pragmatism: what matters, morally speaking, is the habits and how they shape the moral character of the player. This argument relies on an 'internal' criterion since it takes seriously features of game play itself: the activity and habit of playing these violent games. I argue that while there is no proof for a direct, causal connection between violent games and behaviour, violence in games is morally problematic since *as a habit and skill* it is likely to influence – indeed harm – the moral character of players.

In addition to this argument from virtue (and partly also in order to further elaborate the 'virtue ethics' perspective), I offer an argument why even non-violent gaming can be problematic and why violent gaming is *particularly* problematic: the development of our moral capacities crucially depends on (non-digital, bodily) vulnerability. The possibility for violence, by contrast, depends on the denial of, and attempt to escape from, one's own vulnerability and the vulnerability of others. However, this argument, which drawn from the phenomenological tradition in philosophy but may also take inspiration from contemporary cognitive science, raises a crucial question: how 'digital' is digital game play really? Do we leave our body 'at home' when we play or are we always already embodied, also when we play 'digital' games? What happens if the game character appears as a social other? What are the consequences of these answers for violent gaming?

Note that my discussion of how to evaluate violence in digital games is not meant to be comprehensive. First, there are views and arguments about digital games that will not be discussed here. For example, some think that violent digital

games are 'bad' or 'evil' simply because there is violence in them. I leave this view out of the discussion since it is too simplistic and unsupported by (further) argument. Second, there is more to ethics of digital games than can be discussed in this chapter. For example, Sicart has argued that the ethics of computer games is not only about the ethics of players but also about the ethics of game design, communities, and (fictional) worlds (Sicart, 2009). Finally, the approach I take in this chapter engages with both philosophical concepts and empirical research (psychology, media studies). Like any other attempt at interdisciplinarity, this incurs all kinds of difficulties on its own. One of them is that however much one tries to learn from different academic disciplines, there will always be work that one overlooks or misinterprets. Nevertheless, I hope that the arguments I will outline in the following pages will contribute to on-going efforts in this volume and elsewhere to enhance the quality of discussions about (violence in) digital games.

Consequentialist Argument

Discussions of violence in digital games usually focus on the question if there is a causal connection between playing violent games and real-world violent behaviour. Are people who play these games – not only children and teenagers, but also adults – more likely to act violently in the real world?

Establishing such a causal connection is crucial if we wish to construct what philosophers call a *consequentialist* argument. In this ethical-theoretical approach, ethical evaluation of violent digital games requires evaluation of the consequences of these games. If the consequences of a game or a category of games are bad, this argument goes, then that game or this type of games is bad. Thus, in this approach the main question is: Does the violent game cause violent *behaviour*? If so, then should we ban the game?[3] If not, what can be done to prevent a 'spill over' of digital violence into the real world?

The literature on the behavioural effects of violent digital games delivers contradicting results. Some studies claim that there *is* a causal link. For example, Anderson concluded from his meta-analysis that there is a causal link between exposure to violent video games and increases in real-world aggressive behaviour: his review found that 'exposure to violent video games increases aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviours' (Anderson, 2003: 114; see also Barlett et al., 2009; Anderson, 2010).

Other studies contradict this. For instance, in *Grand Theft Childhood* (2008) Kutner and Olson warn that it is too simplistic to make the general claim that violent video games make children or adults more violent:

> 'It's clear that the "big fears" bandied about in the press – that violent video games make children significantly more violent in the real world; that children engage in the illegal, immoral, sexist and violent acts they see in some of these games – are not supported by the current research, at least in such a simplistic form. That should make sense to anyone who thinks about it. After all, millions of children and adults play these games, yet the world has not been reduced to chaos and anarchy.' (Kutner & Olson, 2008, p. 18)

While the authors agree that there may be negative influences on *some* teenagers, they argue that people playing violent games for all kinds of reasons and that they can also have good effects. For example, it can even help children to acquire useful or even necessary skills like mastering the experience of fear. Moreover, they criticise lab experiments for assuming that subjects cannot distinguish between (lab) aggression and (real-world) violence (Kutner & Olson, 2008, p. 65), for failing to take into account difficulties with the reliability of responses from children (p. 67-68), and for neglecting to compare lab results to real-world evidence, in particular (declining) crime rates (p. 61).

Moreover, recently Ferguson has criticised some beliefs about violent video games as 'urban legends'. For example, he questions the link that is often made between school shooting incidents and violent video games; he does not see any support for making such a link (Ferguson, 2009).

Given these and other criticisms, empirical claims about a causal link are at least controversial – regardless of the position they take towards violent games. This lack of consensus among scientists remains a major weakness of consequentialist arguments against violence in game play, since this kind of arguments depend on knowledge of causes and consequences.

Since it is hard to provide uncontroversial empirical proof for a direct causal connection, those who nevertheless feel that violent digital games are morally problematic find themselves without uncontroversial scientific support for their intuition. All that is left, it seems, is an empty moralist claim.

Argument from Moral Emotions and Virtue

However, ethical theory offers other approaches that might be more helpful to those who still have the intuition that something is wrong with violent video games. Let me construct an alternative argument by relying on two theoretical sources routed in two philosophical traditions: the 'moral sentiment' tradition (18th century) and virtue ethics (starting with Aristotle). Before I say more about games, let me first unpack this conceptual tool-box.

Empathy

The moral sentiment (or moral sense) tradition is part of the so-called 'Scottish Enlightenment' and includes thinkers like David Hume and Adam Smith. They reacted against the moral rationalism of Plato and Kant. For Kant, moral truths are knowable by reason. According to Hume and Smith, by contrast, morality is not based on reason but on sentiment. They argued that the *passions* – today we would say: emotions – are crucial to morality: we need not so much reason but a kind of moral *sensitivity*. For example, we need empathy in order for us to develop into moral beings.

What is empathy and what is its moral role? Smith (who uses the term *sympathy*) argued in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) that for us to feel compassion with someone who suffers, we need imagination:

> 'By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, (...). His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us (...).' (Smith, 1759, p. 12)

For Smith, this imaginative exercise is the source of what he called 'fellow-feeling' and what we may call *compassion*. We can only feel *with* and feel *for* someone else if we feel '*in*': we put ourselves in his or her shoes and 'bring home' their suffering 'to ourselves'. Then we are com-passionate.

However, we can only act compassionately if we at the same time realise that the sufferer is another, not oneself. In her interpretation of the moral sentiment tradition in *Upheavals of Thought* (2001), Nussbaum compares empathy with method acting: 'empathy is like the mental preparation of a skilled (Method) actor: it involves a participatory enactment of the situation of the sufferer, but is always combined with the awareness that one is not oneself the sufferer' (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 327). By means of this 'twofold attention' (p. 328), we can comprehend the other's suffering and feel compassionate.

But empathy is not only useful in relation to our attitude towards (the suffering of) others. It also helps us to evaluate (and hence regulate) our *own* conduct. Hence, Smith views empathy (or sympathy) as essential to morality:

> we either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, according as we feel that, when we place ourselves in the situation of another man, and view it, as it were, with his eyes and from his station, we either can or cannot entirely enter into and sympathize with the sentiments and motives which influenced it. (Smith, 1759, p. 128)

Thus empathy makes us (more) compassionate and is necessary in processes of moral self-evaluation. These two moral functions of empathy render it a crucial,

much needed moral capacity. Without it, we fail to act compassionately towards others and, more generally, fail to guide our own conduct appropriately.

Virtue

This attention to the kinds of capacities or skills we need for moral development is shared by the virtue ethics tradition in ethical theory. In contrast to modern ethical theories such as deontology or consequentialism, virtue ethics moves away from the question what we should do (which action is morally right or wrong) and instead pays attention to the moral *character* and the training of virtue. Following Aristotle's approach, the question is not so much what is right (to do) but rather what is good, what promotes moral excellence as humans. What one needs is not so much knowledge of the rules or the laws, but *phronesis*: practical wisdom about how to do things well. The goal of such an ethics is human *flourishing* (Greek: *eudaimonia*), which depends on the proper development of one's human capacities and their development within a human community (for Aristotle this was the *polis*: the Greek city state).

In contemporary philosophy, this ancient approach to ethics has been taken up by Anscombe, MacIntyre, Foot, Hursthouse, Nussbaum, and other 'virtue ethicists'. (For example, Nussbaum relates her list of human capabilities to human flourishing, which she understands in a pluralist way as a 'space for diverse possibilities for flourishing' (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 182). We may interpret Nussbaum's approach here as implying that virtue and flourishing consists in realising human capabilities – in oneself and in others.) Thus, these writers focus on (the evaluation of) moral character and moral capacities rather than (the evaluation of) rules that are to guide conduct.

Application to Violent Digital Games

Applied to the question concerning violent game play, this moral framework suggests the following criterion for good digital gaming: the games should promote, or at least not hinder the development and exercise of moral emotions and virtues and hence contribute to good, flourishing lives.

The argument from virtue against violent games, then, could run as follows: It seems plausible that violent games do not meet the sympathy/virtue criterion: to the extent that they do not train us to sympathize with others and do not allow us to improve our moral character, they do not promote – and probably rather hinder – such long-term moral developments. Instead, they seem to train moral insensitivity rather than empathy and encourage us to exercise the very opposite of virtue. Thus, even if playing these games does not result in violence (to others),

they do not seem to contribute to moral development of the players and may even harm it.

Let me further unpack and develop this argument in the next pages. I shall start with considering an objection: Is there any *evidence* for this argument from virtue? Let me first repeat that the kind of claim I make here is very different from saying, as Barlett and Anderson do, that there is *conclusive* evidence that violent games *cause* later aggressive behaviour (Barlett & Anderson, 2009). The ethical problem here is rather located in what happens to the moral character of the player (rather than direct harm to others) and does not make a causal claim (which would need empirical evidence to support it). The argument I am developing here rests on the assumption that one's actions, and in particular one's habits, impact on one's moral emotions and shape one's moral character – whether or not those actions and habits are categorized as gaming or playing, and whether or not those actions and habits actually result in (real-world) violence towards other people.

This does not render empirical research irrelevant to the argument from virtue. Of course we might try to support a particular argument (e.g. about desensitization or empathy) with empirical evidence. For example, Anderson and other have found that exposure to violent video games 'was related to desensitization and lack of empathy' (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 167). And Bushman and Anderson have done a study that shows that participants who played violent games took longer to help an injured victim, from which they conclude that violent media make people numb to the suffering of others (Bushman and Anderson, 2009). However, as said such findings are controversial and the argument from virtue I outline here depends on a conceptual relation between virtue and habit, which allows one to make to construct the following argument: if it is true that the development of moral emotions and virtue rests on habit (first premise), then if violent playing becomes a habit (second premise), violent playing hinders and harms the development of moral emotions and virtue (conclusion). (Related arguments in the next page are also based on analysis of concepts such as vulnerability and empathy.)

The argument from virtue is one about self-evaluation. This becomes clear if we link it further to the argument from moral emotions. The development of virtue is aided by empathy as a tool for self-evaluation: if I imagine what others (will) think of my conduct, this encourages virtue. But games do not promote this kind of empathetic process. What Vallor notes in her discussion of the virtue of patience in relation to social networking technologies seems applicable to empathy and gaming:

> 'The gaze of the morally significant other, which holds me respectfully in place and solicits my ongoing patience, is a critical element in my moral development; though I might for all that ignore it, it creates an important situational gradient in the virtuous direction.' (Vallor, 2010, p. 10)

Such a gaze – real or imagined – seems to be missing in violent games, where others do not appear as morally significant – if they appear at all as an other rather than an object (although it is more complicated than this; I will say more about this below). The game characters appear as human-shaped, for example, but it does not get the moral status of humans since we are allowed and even encouraged to act violently towards it. But if we are unable to imagine that game character as an other, we cannot morally evaluate what we do. In this sense, we find ourselves in a moral-social desert. The absence of the moral gaze allows us and encourages us to *act* as impatient, disembodied, insensitive, a-social, and anti-social killers in a pornography[4] of slaughtering and bloodshed.

We can conclude that from this perspective, the problem with violent games is not so much their violent *content* but the violent game play itself: game play as an activity and a habit. If we habitually play them, then we train moral insensitivity, are unable to evaluate ourselves, and therefore fail to become virtuous, flourishing human beings: beings for which others really matter as potentially suffering, vulnerable beings and as beings that are indispensable for evaluating the quality of our own moral character and moral development.

The Medium and the Message

In order to further develop this argument, it can be stated in terms of 'medium' versus 'message'. If ethics focuses on the violent content of a game, it is concerned with its 'message'. But this supposes that games are a neutral medium, a kind of container that gets filled with content. This is an instrumental view of technology and media, which must be criticized if we want to achieve a better understanding of violent game play and its moral dimensions. We should not only look at the 'message' (violent *content*) but also at what the 'medium' does to us, that is, what the game play itself does.

This approach to new media may take its inspiration from the 'classic' work of McLuhan, whose famous expression 'the medium is the message' conveyed the thought that in order to evaluate the influence of media and technologies we should focus on the characteristics of the medium rather than its content (McLuhan, 1964). For McLuhan, technology is not a mere tool but changes our way of life; it changes us. He gives the example of railways, which changed the way we think about time, perceive time, and the way in which we live. As contemporary philosophy of technology teaches, every technology has unintended effects. Therefore, it is inadequate to focus only on the intentions of the designers or on the reasons people give for using the technology.

This analysis can meaningfully be applied to digital games (Coeckelbergh, 2007b). Games too have unintended effects on the way people think, perceive, and live their lives, such as the discussed effects on moral emotions and virtue.

These effects cannot and should not be reduced to causal links between ('digital') playing and ('real-world') behaviour (as Anderson does) or to the reasons people give for playing games (as Kutner and Olson do). What matters to ethics (as virtue ethics) and to media studies inspired by this approach, is the effect of (features of) the technology on what one does and what one learns, that is, how one lives and grows as a moral human being.

Importantly, this approach directs us to the features of the activity and habit of gaming rather than to the violent content in itself. Compared with other media digital games have at least the following features. First, they are *interactive* since gamers are actively engaged in the game 'world'; they are not just receivers (as in 'traditional' TV consumption). Second, related to this they have a higher degree of *immersion* than other media like film. Gamers are 'in' the game so to speak. The makers of the game aim to erase the very experience of a medium. There is immediacy (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). Third, there are *social* aspects to games: there is social or quasi-social interaction 'within' the game world (the game character interacts with other 'human' game characters, monsters, etc.) and these virtual others are not always merely generated by the programme; in multiplayer on-line games there are other 'real' people 'behind' the avatars.

These features of the 'medium' influence the 'message' in a morally significant way. For example, they render violence more morally problematic in the manner explained above. The interactive, immersive, and social aspect allow the player to train capacities (and de-train other capacities) in a way that is very similar to what would happen in the real world. At the level of skill (see also below) the difference between digital and non-digital, virtual and non-virtual is no longer relevant. People train violence skills and de-train empathy. Hence even if they do not go out into the real world to commit violent acts (which is extremely rare indeed), their moral development into good, flourishing human beings is affected. Regardless of possible effects on their actual behaviour, their moral character is damaged.

Moreover, according to this argument from virtue, the main moral problem with violent games is not so much that the gamer could harm *others* (which is the main concern of modern liberal ethics as found in Mill and other liberal writers). Instead, the Aristotelian 'virtue' argument is that harm is done to *oneself*. As McCormick puts it:

> 'By participating in simulations of excessive, indulgent, and wrongful acts, we are cultivating the wrong sort of character. (...) By engaging in such activities, you do harm to yourself in that you erode your virtue, and you distance yourself from your goal of eudaimonia.' (McCormick, 2001, p. 285)

Indirectly, this erosion of virtue then *may* harm others, but if this does not happen – as is usually the case with violent digital games – the urgent moral problem

concerns the moral character of the gamer. Hence the ancient, Socratic imperative "Know Thyself", which we may understand here as: "Know your own moral character", that is, improve your own character. (However, this is not an argument for a kind of moral egoism. The idea is that if one's own character can be improved, the problem regarding harm to others will take care of itself.)

A gamer might object: "I know the violence not real.' But the neo-Aristotelian point is that whether or not it is real, virtual, digital, non-digital and so on, the gamer is practising or de-practising virtue. What matters in this approach is the ethical quality of the activity and its results for one's character, not reality or virtuality. In this approach, the virtuality-reality distinction cannot be given the moral significance usually attached to it.

Similarly, this approach does not give as much importance to the *play*-reality distinction. Indeed, one may object that people are *playing* rather than being violent. But is it right to oppose 'playing' and 'being violent'? It may be that by stepping into the play, players only 'temporarily' suspend the conventional rules of morality, which the players are very well aware of. However, the neo-Aristotelian view defended here does not accept this as a counter-argument since it holds that what matters ethically is not what people agree to or what rules they follow, but what they actually (habitually) *do* – in other words, in violent games there *is* a sense in which the players are 'being violent' *as players*, and the argument goes that if this kind of playing becomes a habit, then their character becomes more violent and the development and exercise of moral emotions is hindered.

Again, it is a feature of the medium, in particular the (inter-)active aspect of games, which makes gaming attractive in the first place, that makes this moral (de-)training possible. As Huntemann wrote in *Game Over*:

> 'You know what's really exciting about video games is you don't just interact with the game physically – you're not just moving your hand on a joystick, but you're asked to interact with the game psychologically and emotionally as well. You're not just watching the characters on screen, *you're becoming those characters.*' (Huntemann quoted in Anderson et al. 2010, p. 151; my emphasis)

Ferguson has criticized the claim that interactivity is the problem, citing studies to show that there is no evidence for an increased effect for videogames (Ferguson, 2011). However, the point here is not about effects on aggressive behaviour, but what it does to moral character.

Moreover, as I already noted, what seems particularly harmful to one's character is that in violent games other entities often appear in a way that hinders the development of empathy. Let me now further develop this argument. Not only do we thereby miss the moral gaze of the other, there is something problematic about the appearance of game characters. There are at least three possibilities, which can all be morally problematic in different ways: (1) the game character is not allowed

to appear *as an other* and is turned into a non-other, which does not deserve moral consideration, (2) the game character is said to be 'evil', or (3) the game character is *not* viewed as an object, as in possibility (1), but is viewed as an other, that is, a social entity (see also Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010, p. 95). With regard to possibilities (1) and (2), it is problematic that in violent games most other 'beings' tend to appear as beings that stand in my way, that need to be terminated, since if that happens, I may become accustomed to see (real) others in this way. With regard to (3), it is problematic that *first* we see the character as a social other, and *then* we behave violently towards it. Thus, (3) seems to be a precondition of (1) and (2): it is because we first anthropomorphise the game character, that the moral problem can arise in the first place. If we *really* treated game characters as objects, there would be no moral problem about damaging your character by treating the game characters in a violent way, since the only habit we would train was a habit about treating objects. (And most likely we could not even play the game in the first place.)

Thus, the problem is not so much that we see things in the 'wrong' way when playing, but that we are *really* (that is, in reality) exercising a particular 'violence' habit and skill. This will be more likely if and when the virtual game world appears increasingly more real, when we have more possibilities to act in it, and so on (see also the features listed above). This does not mean that the gamer will *necessarily* see (real) others in this way or that the gamer will then also necessarily and unavoidably *act* accordingly in the real world; there is no determinism here. But the gamer will get *used* to different moral glasses (perception) *and* different ways of doing (*skill*), regardless of 'where' this moral development happens. The virtual and the real, the digital and the non-digital, coincide in the activity, the habit, and the skill. This is why what Hartmann and Vorderer call 'moral disengagement', involving dehumanization (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010, p. 98), is morally problematic in *both* the 'real' world and the 'virtual' world (or 'play' world). From this perspective, gamers are not 'just' gaming; their gaming itself – as activity, habit, and skill – is morally relevant.

For example, if a gamer trains shooting skills in context of a game, involving similar appearances as in the real world (e.g. a virtual gun or controller that looks, feels, and is *handled* and used in a way similar to a real world gun, combined with a virtual environment that is very similar to a real-world environment), then the gamer is not 'only' playing but – as a player and while playing – is training shooting skills and is learning to see the game character, which first appeared as a social other, as an object that has to be eliminated. To play and act in this way requires one to morally disengage, to become less sensitive, not to empathize with the character, and so on. The player is not training 'digital' shooting skills or 'playing' shooting – if that means the training is not 'real'. In so far as particular habits and skills are formed in the process, then at least those habits and skills, and the associated moral disengagement and de-sensitizing associated with them, are very real.

These tentative remarks about appearances and skills bring me to the next, phenomenological argument concerning vulnerability and engagement.

Argument from Vulnerability

The previous argument does a reasonable job at helping to justify the intuition that in spite of overwhelming evidence that playing violent games does not generally and not directly lead to massive violence, there is something wrong – morally wrong – with playing these games regularly and intensively.

However, we can also think of an argument for why even *non-violent* games might morally problematic according to this approach, which is at the same time an argument for why violent games are *particularly* morally problematic. In the following pages I first construct this argument but I will also question its main assumption (the assumption that gaming is disembodied).

The Argument from Vulnerability and its Relation to Virtue

Moral capacities such as empathy or compassion, but even virtues like courage, presuppose (bodily) vulnerability. If I did not have a vulnerable body, I could not act courageously in a violent conflict. The very idea of 'courage' as a virtue would not even make sense since the possibility to be (really) hurt would be removed. In other words, there would not be a real risk. Similarly, empathy and compassion presuppose a human, shared vulnerability. Let me explain this.

In empathic and compassionate encounters I recognize that the other is as vulnerable as I am. This is partly due to our embodied existence, on which empathy and compassion depend. I can only feel empathy and compassion if I presuppose that the other also has a (human) body like me, which means the person can *suffer*, feel that there is a risk, and reflect on this risk and suffering (with expectations, fear, etc.).

However, in digital games, it seems, we have only a virtual body. There are no real risks, no risks that matter to our (real) bodies and to our lives. This does not only mean that I cannot develop the virtue of courage, but also that I cannot develop empathy and compassion, since these capacities presuppose shared bodily vulnerability.

This disembodied aspect of gaming also seems to imply that digital games may discourage engagement with and in the world. In *On the Internet* (2001), for example, Dreyfus has criticised the internet for posing no real risk and therefore for its absence of real engagement (Dreyfus, 2001). In tune with contemporary cognitive science[5] he emphasizes the philosophical relevance of the fact that we are embodied beings. From this perspective, it seems that anything happening in the digital

world dis-embodies us, removes us from felt activity and lived experience, alienates us. Games seem to remove of us from the real world.

Digital games also involve absence of risk to our *social* existence in so far as we take on a different identity. In the 'digital' world, it seems, we do not really put ourselves – as social, vulnerable, embodied beings – at risk. If this is true, it implies that we cannot develop empathy or evaluate ourselves in the way Smith described (there is no real other in whose situation we can put ourselves and whom we can imagine as keeping an eye on us) and that we cannot develop virtues such as courage or compassion since these are *social* virtues. If this is true, then whatever else may be good or bad about digital gaming, they do not offer a suitable context for the exercise of virtue.

Moreover, this renders *violent* games particularly problematic from a moral point of view since they can only be played, it seems, if we leave the real world of bodily vulnerability and risk and if we leave the social world. Playing a violent game requires me to block out compassion and empathy, which – according to this argument – can only be realised if I block out my own (real, bodily) vulnerability, if I remove myself from the experience of (real) risk, and if I remove myself from the (real) social world.

This escapism is partly what games promise us and offer us. It is what many players attempt to do: escape boring earth, ugly daily life. To put it à la Plato: they see the non-digital body as a prison from which they can escape to the digital world, where their souls can flourish, unhindered by bodily, social, and material conditions.

Objection and Further Discussion

But how disembodied are we really when we play digital games? A possible objection to the argument from vulnerability is that we are *not* disembodied when we play a game. The existential conditions remain in place. In activity, the distinction between digital and non-digital blurs. Like moral expertise (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1991), game play is a *skill*, which involves the whole person – as a bodily and social being. As suggested before, gaming is better described in terms of activity than perception. This is especially so in the case of games as opposed to other, less interactive media. Less interactive media may also provide violent content, but mainly involve representation and imagination. Watching TV is not a skill, or at least a skill that does not require much involvement. Gaming, by contrast, is a skill and engages: it involves our emotions and our bodies to a greater extent.

Moreover, if in a game the (other) game characters appear as social others, then we *remain* in the social world, we do not leave it. This means that there *are* social risks in the 'digital' world of the game, as there are social risks in the 'digital' world of the Internet.

If this is true, then we must at least modify the previous argument: when we play a game we remain vulnerable beings (as embodied and social beings) that train game skills and moral skills, although it is only through the *denial* of that vulnerability (the denial of the body and of sociality) that we are able to engage in digital violence.

This means that the strong distinction between digital and non-digital, which is made most gamers when they defend their practice by defining it as a-moral (not immoral but rather removed from the field of morality), is an illusion that supports the alienations of vulnerability denial or striving for invulnerability. By playing the violent game, neither oneself nor the other are perceived or construed as vulnerable, bodily, and social beings. This denial of vulnerability makes it difficult for empathy or compassion to take off – that is, it supports the conditions for violence to arise. In this sense too, the medium is the message: violence is not so much *caused* by vulnerability denial or striving for invulnerability (this is not a point about which factors *cause* particular violent acts), but at least vulnerability denial provides its condition of possibility and therefore promotes it in this sense. It is because in the game we construe ourselves as disembodied that we are able to engage in violent game play. But the attempt to escape vulnerability remains a denial and an illusion: when we play 'digital' games we are not 'somewhere else' in separate 'digital world' or 'virtual world', we are still ourselves as embodied and social, hence moral beings. It just may take some time and effort before we realize it.[6]

If this is true, it is unhelpful to employ and enforce the distinction between digital and non-digital in order to argue that gaming is morally unproblematic (that is, part of an a-moral, digital world). As said, this is the usual strategy: it is said that these games are 'just digital', 'just virtual', and so on. In this view, the only thing we need to do is following a strategy of containment: make sure the border between the two worlds remains impermeable: digital violence should not leave the 'digital' world. But if my analysis is right, then following this strategy re-enforces the denial of vulnerability and thus helps to re-enforce a major precondition for the rise of violence.

Instead, it is only when we recognize the 'reality' of game play as an embodied and social exercise and presence[7] that we can *feel* or develop a *sense* of what may be morally wrong with violent game play. Again, from this perspective, gaming is not 'just' gaming, which takes place in a virtual world, but a skill, a being-in-the-world (Heidegger), and a way of *life* indeed. As social, bodily, lived experience, gaming and playing is not something that goes on 'in' the computer or 'in' a virtual world. It is (in) us; we are playing. Thus, gaming is not 'just' digital. It is not even digital as such. Understood as an activity and as an experience, it neither digital nor non-digital (or, if you like, it is both digital and non-digital). Medium and content are one. In habit and skill, in lived experience and activity, these distinctions evaporate. For this reason, anything that goes on 'in' the alleged 'digital' world of the game, is directly morally relevant and cannot be construed as a-moral, as having nothing to do with morality or ethics. Morally speaking, inside and outside

merge. An ethics of gaming as a virtue ethics or an ethics of human flourishing, therefore, must be concerned with what we perceive, feel, do, and are on our way to become – wherever that is, regardless of categories such as digital or non-digital, virtual or non-virtual.

Conclusion

In response to difficulties with arguments that rely on proof of causal links between 'digital' and 'real-world' behaviour (or the absence thereof), I have offered an alternative, 'virtue' approach to ethics of digital gaming and I have enriched this approach with theory of moral emotions and with a discussion of the relation between bodily and social vulnerability, empathy, and violence. I conclude that while the arguments made here do not seem sufficient to justify a straightforward and strong condemnation of all violence in games (let alone a ban of such games), they help us to put the finger on what may be morally problematic about digital games and violent digital games in particular.

From the last section of this chapter I conclude that in order to prevent 'real-world' violence, it is unhelpful to re-enforce the distinction between real and virtual, digital and non-digital. I suggested instead that it is precisely by de-emphasizing the moral importance of this distinction that we can come to attend to what violent games do with us (e.g. disembody us or not, hinder empathy or not, etc.) in relation to virtue and human flourishing. It reformulates the question about violent digital games as a question about violent *gaming* as activity, habit, and skill.

In this way, this chapter has offered some conceptual tools that allow us to take distance from easy moralism (and indeed from easy anti-moralism) about gaming. It forces us to think harder about what we are actually doing when we play a game. In order to know what we *should* do or not do (the normative, moral question), we must first better understand what we actually do when we game: we must know more about the activity, the experience, the habit, the skill, and their effects on others and on ourselves. Then we can ask: Is *that kind of* gaming – digital or not – *good*?

Notes

1. Retrieved from http://666games.net/
2. See for example media reports about the famous 1999 Columbine High School massacre, the cause of which is often attributed to playing digital games.
3. Note that the question if we should ban a game is different from the question if the game is morally unacceptable. Even if we were to judge that a game is morally bad, then this by itself is not a sufficient reason to ban the game. There are other moral considerations that need to be taken into account, such as the value of freedom and the corresponding demand to justify interference by the state (in general *and* in the case at hand).

4. Note also further parallel with pornography: narratives and characters are entirely instrumental; what matters is the deed.
5. See for example the work of Lakoff, Johnson, or Varela.
6. Perhaps this is why suicide often follows murder in high school shootings and other similar massacres: first the murderer plays god, feels invulnerable and shoots – as a kind of execution of his arbitrary, pseudo-divine will, but then confronted with police force realizes his own, bodily and social vulnerability and that of the people he killed. In a sense, only then he realizes what he has done. He realizes that he is a moral being. The last shot is the ultimate return to reality. Game over. But of course reality has always been there, there always was a body; there were other bodies too. Before the body turned into a corpse, there always was the *possibility* of feelings, empathy, and compassion. His perverse interpretation of free will was a denial of something that was always there. In this deeper sense, perhaps, violent gaming *is* related to this kind of shootings.
7. New technology may increase this feeling of presence and hence help to further erase the distinction between digital and non-digital, real and virtual (Ess, 2010).

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