

Playing With Ethics: Video Game Controversy

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Introduction to Gaming Ethics

Video games are widely played for entertainment and amusement; in addition, they can act as an aid in relieving stress. Due to advancing technology, video games have evolved and grown into a large empire impacting those within this realm. Thus many ethical issues are brought to our attention due to this development. As a result, we should recognize how new video games are ethically affecting people who play them. The ethical issues of video gaming that influences many people include: violence, rating, education, stereotyping against women, community and addiction. Ultimately, each topic is linked to violence involved in video games.

It is the players' responsibility to be aware of the negative effects of video gaming. However, the gaming industry should also take part in some social responsibilities as well. What they develop and sell can affect people positively or negatively. For this reason, both the gamers and the gaming industry should acknowledge the ethical issues regarding video gaming, and both need to address these ethical concerns accordingly. Although video games can have many positives, they can also affect gamers in a harmful way.

Violence within Games

A major concern that has been the focus of an ongoing debate regarding video games is violence. Violence is defined in video games as acts in which a character causes or attempts to cause physical injury or death to another character.¹ In a recent study, researchers at the Indiana University School of Medicine using state-of-the-art brain-scanning technology, determined, brain scans of individuals who played a violent video game showed an increase in emotional arousal while decreasing self-control, inhibition, and attention.² Playing violent video games can increase a person's aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behavior both in laboratory settings and in actual life. It can also be argued that violent video games may be more harmful than violent television and movies because of the interactive nature of the games.³ For this reason, violent video games provide a foundation for learning and practicing aggressive solutions to conflict situations. In the short run, playing a violent video game appears to affect aggression by

inducing aggressive thoughts for a short period. On the other hand, prolonged aggressive behavior is likely to result as a long-term effect as well as the player learns and practices new aggression-related techniques that can become more accessible for use when real-life conflict situations arise.³

Other studies surveyed college students and their use of video games. It was concluded students who had played more aggressive video games had also engaged in more aggressive delinquent behavior. Furthermore, player's attitudes and behaviors after playing violent video games (compared to non-violent games) have shown violent video games decrease players' tendencies toward positive behaviors. Correlated to aggressiveness, one report indicated students who spent the most total time playing video games had the lowest academic grades in college.⁴ Consequently, the amount of game play affects grades negatively by displacing time spent in other educational and social activities.

The video game industry has recognized that males seem to enjoy violent video games more than females and have more heavily targeted games toward males. As a result, many critics of the media industry have singled out video games as a major cause of several high school shootings such as the incident at the Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999. It has been claimed that both student shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, enjoyed playing violent video games and speculations have surfaced that these games played a role in their violent acts.⁴

As video games are becoming increasingly realistic, the subset of games featuring violence, gore, and antisocial behavior have raised concern among parents, educators, child advocates, medical professionals, and policy makers.⁵ Compared to television, video game studies have been performed on a much smaller scale due to the relatively current nature of this industry. However, while additional research is essential for accurate information, early results have shown video game violence should be taken into serious consideration.

Video Game Ratings

In the United States, the current rating system for video games is the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). The ESRB is a non-profit, self-regulatory body established in 1994 by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA). ESRB independently assigns computer

and video game content ratings, enforces industry-adopted advertising guidelines and helps ensure responsible online privacy practices for the interactive entertainment software industry.⁶

ESRB ratings have two equal parts: *rating symbols* suggest age appropriateness for the game while *content descriptors* indicate elements in a game that may have triggered a particular rating and/or may be of interest or concern.⁶ There are currently six ESRB rating categories: Early Childhood (ages 3+), Everyone (ages 6+), Everyone 10+ (ages 10+), Teen (ages 13+), Mature (ages 17+), and Adults Only (ages 18+).

A particular area of interest encompassing the issue of ratings for video games is the accuracy of the ratings, or lack thereof. In one study, researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston took a random sample of video games currently on the market and discovered many of the games are inconsistent with the content descriptors assigned to the games.⁷ Based on their findings, researchers said that an improvement is needed in the rating system and suggests the game industry to provide individuals with clear, complete, and consistent information when selecting a video game.

In regards to video game ratings, Senator Sam Brownback (R-Kansas) reintroduced his Truth in Video Game Rating Act in February 2007. Brownback first introduced the bill in September 2006 and was referred to the senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation committee, but the bill was not voted on and later denied by U.S. Congress.⁸ However, with the beginning of the new year and start of the new congress, Senator Brownback feels comfortable reintroducing the proposal for further consideration.

The Truth in Video Game Rating Act intends to eliminate the way video games sold in the United States are currently rated. The bill requires video game rating organizations to play all games “in their entirety” before issuing labels and prohibiting game developers from withholding any “hidden” game content from raters.⁹ It would also punish rating groups who “grossly mischaracterize” any of the game’s content.

With the current video game ratings system, Brownback expresses it “is not as accurate as it could be because reviewers do not see the full content of games and do not even play the games they rate.”⁹ Entertainment Software Association, which owns the Entertainment Software Rating Board, fired back in disagreement and argued that the existing rating process is already sufficiently reliable and “remarkably useful.”

Senator Brownback's legislation is directed towards the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and is demanding that they prescribe rules to prohibit "deceptive conduct in the rating of video and computer games and for other purposes."⁹ The bill also insists the FTC to examine the effectiveness of the ESRB along with recommending the notion of a "universal ratings system" that applies for all film, televisions, and games.

With the ongoing debate about the current rating system, one may question if it really is sufficient enough. As mentioned, inaccurate ratings are common, which poses to be a problem. Sensitive content, such as violence, is not suitable for children and should not be available to them. Video games featuring violence teach children concepts that were not intended to be for them. Therefore, strict regulations are needed to be placed on the current rating system to prevent inappropriate material from being obtained by the unintended.

Education Position

An issue that arises in an educational aspect is whether video games are ethical or not. Gaming has taught both adults and kids many things; some are beneficial while others are believed to be immoral. Some players and developers argue that video games are better at teaching logic and problem solving skills than many school curriculums.¹⁰ While others say that video games teach people to become more violent due to the violence in the game. In order to determine whether video gaming is good or bad in regards to education, we need to evaluate the positive and negative outcomes.

One may ask, "How can video games teach us logic and problem solving skills?" As you may have noticed, there are many different types of video games. Such as games for children, problem solving games, combat games, adventure games, strategic games, and games intended for adults only. As each individual interprets various games with their own judgments, there are certain types of games where players agree they acquire the same type of skills. For example, adventure games will tend to teach logic because players have to discover where to go and what to do at what point in time in order to progress to the next level. A puzzle game will teach those engaged in it problem solving skills; being able to solve different puzzles is one way to enhance this type of skill.

On the other hand, one may question, "How can players who partake in video games be more violent?" Just like rating for movies, there are ratings for games as well. One of the main

characteristics for the Entertainment Software Review Board (ESRB) is to rate games based on the content involved in the game. Ratings are designed so that buyers know what to expect before purchasing a particular game. There are many levels of violence that can be used to rate a “violent” game. Games that involve heavy violence are always rated “M” for mature. Can a game exhibiting violence teach a mature person to be violent? The violence within a game will tempt a person to be violent but not make them violent. An example is an individual playing a racing game where they can speed and crash into whatever or whoever they want, yet nothing will happen because it is just a game. Consequently, this game is going to make the individual think it is cool and fun to imitate the game. However, the odds of the individual reenacting what they do in the games are highly unlikely because the consequences in the game are different from that of reality.

Is this the same as saying that occupying oneself with video games teaches logic and problem solving skills, but at the same time does not make them more violent? No. So the answer depends on the person who is playing the game. Different people have different opinions and different reactions in this matter. Regardless of their intelligence levels, some people engage in puzzle games and obtain problem solving skills, while others do not gain any skills from playing video games. Some play violent games and become aggressive, while others are not affected because they know it is just a game meant for entertainment.

Stereotyping in the Gaming Industry

Currently, video games appeal overwhelmingly to the male population. Only 7-8 percent of video game developers are women.¹⁰ Does this mean that game developers only hire males to design video games? Likewise, about 12 percent of the game players are women, and women are usually not the main character in the games.¹¹ With these facts, are video games really just for males? And are women being excluded from this industry? Over the years, people continue to supply the video game industry with more and more money, knowing that woman gamers only take up a small percentage. Is this to make the males dominant? Or is this just a coincidence that video game companies produce revenue regardless?

In general, most women are not fascinated with video games. Video games are not attractive to females as they are to males. For majority of females there is nothing enticing about anchoring oneself in front of a television screen and playing a video game that may be viewed as

being “pointless.” This is one of the main reasons why not many women have a profession in game designing or developing, because this is not what most women enjoy. One may say that companies do not want to hire women to develop games for them, because a significant amount of women do not play video games, therefore know nothing about games. Though, this may not be the case. A company’s main objective is to make a profit, and to do that they need to produce top-rated video games that people will want. In producing a popular video game, a company would not care who produces it, it is the end product they are concern about. Therefore if there is a woman who can produce a better video game than a man, then that woman will definitely be hired rather than the man.

Another question is why would people invest in the video game industry knowing that over 50 percent of the U.S. population is female but only 12 percent of these females play games? Even though very small percentage of the female population plays video games, the scale of games and the size of their audience have grown exponentially with sales in billions of dollars.¹² If the video game market can continue to generate money, it does not matter if females are the majority of the U.S. population, because they have little influence on the sales of video games. For example, a market that has 100 consumers and 10 producers compared to a market that has only 50 consumers and 2 producers. Would you invest in the bigger market or smaller one? Of course you would invest in the smaller market in this case. As a result, a company will invest in gaming whether a lot of women play video games or not. Likewise, should a company not invest in producing make-up, because males in general tend not to use cosmetics? Yet, make-up still exists and continues to grow, because they still continue to generate profit. Is that stereotyping against males? Most would agree the answer is no. Then one may ask, “Why isn’t there more females being portrayed as the main character in video games?” The reason is related to the number of women players in the industry. Would a male play a video game where a woman is the main character? The answer is most likely not. Since 88 percent of the market consists of males, then it can be assumed that about 88 percent of the games would have a male as the main character.

The video game industry, does it pose a threat by stereotyping men against women? Again, the answer depends on the person judging it, whether the person is a man or woman and whether the person is in favor of video games or adverse to it. Men who like to play video games might say there is nothing ethically wrong about video games, while women may disagree

and argue that video games corrupt the minds of the players. One must determine whether the benefits gathered through video games outweigh the costs of the game. The reason for stereotyping is due to the fact that most women aren't interested in video games. The assumption is men tend to be more violent than women, and most video games contain some form of violence. Therefore, men are more likely to play video games than women.

Gaming Addiction within the Community

Video games may be considered social activities because "A Kaiser Family Foundation survey found nearly all the children they polled played video games with friends, siblings, or other relatives."¹³ However, there are some important questions to ponder. How would you weigh on these benefits against addiction of video games? How is violence and addiction interrelated to each other? What kind of effects do video games have on our community? Or, how much do video games obstruct from people's obligation or daily duties?

BBC News recently reported on a man who "...played a computer game for fifty hours straight, with few breaks, and then collapsed and died due to heart failure and exhaustion."¹⁴ This illustrates how serious harms can result from video games, and suggests we should pay more attention to negative effects of video gaming, especially its addiction. In 1994, Fisher conducted an analysis on the addiction to arcade machines. This study took place in a small tourist town, where the gaming machines are available for tourists and teenagers. "Adolescents were surveyed in the study and researchers used pathological measures. The results of the study identified some adolescents were *pathological players* and found not only did they play a lot more, but they were also spending their lunch money in addition to borrowing, stealing, and selling their possessions to play."¹⁴ How do people become addicted to video games? "The brain's reward system is partially responsible for a drug's potent addictive properties, and according to Koeppe and colleagues, video game players seem to experience a dopamine-induced euphoria equivalent to one hit of methamphetamine."¹⁴

"Game addiction is a form of psychological addiction related to a compulsive use of computer and video games, most notably MMORPGs - open ended, online video games known for their depth, breadth, and social interaction."¹⁵ People who are addicted to video games usually crave playing the game and suffer from symptoms of withdrawal when they stop playing. They also enter into the stage of self isolation from friends and family. Furthermore, there are

severe consequences to those who are addicted to violent video games, because they can negatively influence the whole community, not just the people around them. They are more likely to solve hostile situations with aggressive solutions, such as violent acts, when these situations arise. The threatening behavior is learned and practiced through engaging in violent video games which is later used in real-life situations involving others in the community.

The most addictive form of video games are role-playing games (RPG). RPG players take the roles of fictional characters and follow fictional stories with formal rules and guidelines. What makes it more addictive is there are no winners or losers in the RPG, which is the basic difference from traditional games, such as board games or sports. Rather, the RPGs are more collaborative and social, because players usually form and communicate as a group or team. A feature distinctive only to RPGs and not traditional fiction is the interactivity, and the level of plot and settings are really close to reality. Therefore, the realism causes players to believe it is a real world process.

There are a number of negative effects from *World of Warcraft* (WOW), the RPG that eight million people are currently playing. Some real-world situations include: broken marriages, ignored friends, lost jobs, and wrecked lives, because a large amount of time is required to play the game at the top level, consequently leading these players to disregard their obligations and responsibilities of the real world. Some stories of *Warcraft* addiction are:

“One guy turned down a college scholarship because he wasn't ready to go yet. Another had to sell his computer to pay rent, but continued to play from a friend's house. Another was forced into marriage counseling, where he and his wife struck a healthy-sounding compromise of no more than 16 hours of *Warcraft* a week.”¹⁶

Warcraft players blame their faults on Blizzard Entertainment for making the game so addicting, due to the fact that another patch is released when your character reaches the maximum level, and your work is now useless. Maressa Hecht Orzack, Ph.D., clinical psychologist and Director of the Computer Addiction Study Center at McLean Hospital in Belmont, MA, “hears from six or seven people a day seeking treatment for gaming addictions. Even if there are just five or 10 percent who can't stop, that's a large percentage, and I hear from a lot of them.”¹⁶ How should RPG players recognize signs within themselves that can be problematic? They start to ignore friends, they may not be on time to work, and their family relationships start to break.

On the other hand, most *Warcraft* players enjoy the game while keeping up with their life styles. Many *Warcraft* players handle the game carefully, so that they obtain educational and social value. “For one thing, it's a great way to teach teenagers about teamwork, planning, and self-reliance from the comfort of your own home. The workings of the game's economy can often mirror important real-world concepts such as supply and demand. More importantly, they'll learn how it feels to be relied on by a team -- as any *Warcraft* player knows, a group is only as strong as its most careless player, and any team member can cause calamity by slapdash play or inattentiveness.”¹⁶ There are also rare cases where gamers meet their lifetime partners through the game.

Most people enjoy playing video games because video games provide entertainment. Others play to relieve stress, or even in some cases, play to let out the violence anxiety within them. However, video game addiction is very real and serious; it can negatively affect lives in a similar manner that drug addiction does. Moreover, violent video game addiction has potential to create social problems in our community. If someone cannot accomplish their daily tasks because of video games, then there is no doubt that he or she has to recognize the problem.

Gaming Ethics Final Words

It can be agreed that engaging in video games does have many ethical concerns. Through violence, there are many games involving violent acts as well as other content related to violence. This may lead many people to believe that playing these types of video games can cause a person to be more violent. Through the ratings of the games, it helps the parents of young children to pick the right game for their kids. Though, others are concerned that this rating system doesn't prevent people from acquiring video games that are considered to be inappropriate for their age. Through the education perspective, there are different things gaming can teach us, some are positive while others are negative. Through stereotyping, the video game industry focuses towards men more than women, therefore, many people think it is stereotyping against women. Lastly, through addiction and community, participating in an immense amount of time in video game play have caused people to be addicted to it. As a result, they lose valuable time within their communities and miss opportunities from other activities that could be more beneficial for them.

Some think video games are for entertainment purposes and pose no ethical problem. While others believe video gaming has many ethical problems, and the benefits of playing games, such as entertainment, does not outweigh the costs of playing the game. However, from our argument, we believe video game players and developers need to be aware of the ethical concerns regarding video games. Thus, they can understand more about the issues and take preventative measures to address the concerns from violent video games.

Even though the possibility of a person becoming more aggressive due to the violent content of the game may be slim, we still need to take precautions to prevent it from happening. Once the ethical problem spirals out of control, we need to develop more policies and regulations to eliminate these ethical problems or at least reduce them. Regulations do not just appear they need to be created; it is up to those who are willing to fight for a change to bring them into our society. Some suggestions can be to write to the ESRB to have them create ratings to effectively rate the content of each video game, talk to game retailers to have them keep higher rated games locked up, and educate parents to be more cautious about the games their kids are playing. For these actions to take place change is in need and that need is now.

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