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Virtual Murder

By John Sanbonmatsu

As someone who teaches a course on the philosophy and ethics of video games at WPI, I must take issue with the conclusion of the *WPI Journal's* recent article “An Industry Under Fire,” which suggested that there is no evidence of a link between virtual violence, played out on millions of computer screens, and real-world violence.

In fact, there have been numerous credible studies suggesting that children and young people who play violent video games are altered by those experiences, in ways that should give us pause. Some studies have found that playing such games may lead to heightened aggressiveness, while others have found that playing violent games diminishes the ability of players to respond empathetically to the suffering, distress, or trauma of others. As the authors of one 2004 study, in the *Journal of Adolescence*, observed: “In violent video games empathy is not adaptive, moral evaluation is often non-existent, but pro-violence attitudes and behaviors are repeatedly rewarded.”

It is true that there has never been a definitive study proving a direct causal link between playing violent games and real-world violence. But social phenomena as complex as violence do not lend themselves to the sorts of neat, positivistic proofs demanded by industry. Notwithstanding the crudely reductionistic world of games like *The Sims*, human beings cannot in fact be modeled mechanistically, like billiard balls moving predictably under inertia. It's more complicated than that. No one has ever “proved” that misogyny in cinema, music videos, pornogra-

phy, and so on, “causes” rape or sexual harassment, either, or that anti-Semitic propaganda “caused” the Holocaust. That's because they don't, and didn't. The power of culture is subtle, serving to reinforce existing beliefs and attitudes—in this case, attitudes toward violence.

But you don't need a PhD in cultural studies to suspect that video games that invite players to shoot virtual people in the head, to stab life-like virtual people, to murder virtual prostitutes by setting them on fire after having sex with them, or (as in the latest version of *Grand Theft Auto*) to slowly and deliberately torture someone, might be a bad idea. By encouraging players to find pleasure in pretending to inflict trauma on others, such games essentially condition young people to identify with antisocial violence.

The very insistence with which extreme representations of violence continually erupt in video game culture may provide us with an important clue to their wider social function today: namely, normalizing violence and dominating behaviors, precisely at a

“ . . . video games play a crucial role in socializing young people to identify with militaristic values.”



time when the poor and vulnerable are being driven to despair and suicide by neoliberal austerity programs throughout the world. It also is occurring when the U.S. national security state is expanding to frightening proportions, making the entire globe its theater of operations. The antisocial violence and misogyny of gaming culture, simply, appears to be “adaptive” for a technological and social order dependent upon socioeconomic inequality, war, and the destruction of the natural world.

One connection between virtual and real-world violence that can’t be explained or willed away, certainly, is the role of video game culture in militarizing civil society, normalizing state violence, and serving as the proving ground of new weapons technology. If, as apologists for industry maintain, there is no link between virtual and real violence, then why does the U.S. Army maintain *America’s Army*, the online military simulator and recruitment tool, played by millions? Why do our Armed Forces buy ad space in the leading gamer magazines? Why do they integrate Xbox controllers and other game interfaces into their weapons systems? Or spend billions on virtual battlefield training platforms?

Over the last twelve years, the U.S. has killed over one hundred thousand civilians—real people, not virtual ones—in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries, a paroxysm of mass violence out of all proportion to the original terrorist attacks that ostensibly provoked them. Why have the American people gone along with this violence, if not in part because they have accepted powerful cultural myths about the necessity of using violence to resolve political disputes—myths which video game culture promulgates?

This nexus between commercial war simulation and real-world slaughter, what scholars call the “military-industrial-entertainment complex,” often gets buried in the debate over media violence. Yet video games play a crucial role in socializing young people to identify with militaristic values. *Black Ops 2: Call of Duty*, for example, until recently the top bestselling video game (only the release of *GTA5* dethroned

it), invites players to participate in a highly realistic war game simulation from the perspective of the U.S. Special Forces. At the same time, actual Special Forces deployments have gone up 400 percent, and the Special Forces budget has tripled. Though lionized in the mainstream mass media, these Forces have committed atrocities against civilians and helped the President undermine international rule of law. Yet rather than question the wisdom or constitutionality of the President’s vast expansion of the powers of the U.S. Special Operations Command, millions of young people instead are playing *Black Ops 2* and similar games, symbolically enacting the violent policies of the U.S. national security state.

This broad identification of the populace with organized violence has spillover effects in civil society, where young killers model their tactics on their favorite games. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who killed 12 fellow students, a teacher, and themselves at Columbine High School in 1999, modeled their ram-

page on the first-person shooter game *Doom* (a game also modified by the U.S. Marines to train soldiers). Anders Breivik, the right-wing extremist who murdered 69 people, mostly teenagers, on the Norwegian island of Utoya in 2011, later bragged that he had done his weapons training on *Modern Warfare*, which he had played for up to 16 hours a day as “part of my training-simulation.” Breivik was indeed so fond of a particular model of gunsight he used in the game that he bought the real version and had it installed on the rifle he used to hunt down his victims. Aaron Alexis, too, the deranged man who in September treated a U.S. Naval installation as his own first person shooter, had played *Modern Warfare* obsessively in the weeks leading up to his attack. “He played all the time. That was his passion,” a friend of the killer later told ABC News. “It got so bad—was in his room all the time ... he’d be late for work.” Yet another aficionado of the game was Adam Lanza, the 20-year-old who murdered 26 people, most of them elementary school children, in the Sandy Hook attack. Lanza,

“As if cribbing from the NRA, the video game industry clings to the view that video games don’t kill people, people kill people.”

too, was obsessed with the game, playing it for hundreds, or thousands, of hours before the attack.

The question is, how could anyone walk into a classroom crowded with innocent young children and systematically slaughter them, unless he (it is always a “he”) had been raised for years playing games conditioning him to shoot everything in sight? When in our history as a species has such a thing happened before? Humans invented firearms six centuries ago; yet until only a short time ago, mass atrocities against unarmed civilians were committed only by soldiers during war time. Video game culture has now helped spread the disease to civil society.

To be sure, exposure to violent media is only one factor among others. Gender socialization, bullying, socioeconomic background, mental health status, and so on, are also key. Yet there is no getting around the fact that real-world atrocities are being closely modeled on virtual scenarios provided by the games industry, and that killers are using games to train for murder.

As if cribbing from the NRA, though, the video game industry clings to the view that video games don’t kill people, people kill people. The same industry which, in other contexts, boasts about the extraordinary power of interactive media and simulations to condition behavior, train body-memory, and shape perceptual consciousness, suddenly turns its back on its own research data, maintaining that violent games like *Gary’s Mod* are no different than *Parcheesi*.

Then how do we make sense of what happened in the town of Slaughter, La., in August, when an 8-year-old boy shot and killed his 90-year-old caregiver, minutes after playing *Grand Theft Auto*? Whence did such a young child get the idea of shooting his caregiver in the head, if not from the violent media culture that surrounds him?

Such tragedies fail to impress the industry’s academic apologists, who continue to circle the wagons around what is, in fact, not an “industry under fire” (“under fire” from whom? from the Congress and Supreme Court, which refuse to regulate it? from the capitalist entrepreneurs who fund it?) but, on the contrary, the most profitable, powerful, and unscrupulous media industry on earth. Such critics, faced with yet more shootings, merely dismiss them as “copycat” attacks, suggesting that killers simply enact what they hear on the news.

“This broad identification of the populace with organized violence has spillover effects in civil society”

But when my friends and I heard stories about the earlier Boston Strangler killings as kids growing up in the 1970s, it never occurred to any of us to strangle anyone, or to play-act the murders. When I tell my students, though, that it would never have occurred to any of us to imagine picking up a gun and shooting other children at random, or to mow down pedestrians with an automobile, or to have sex with prostitutes and then knife them to death, they don’t believe me. They are so used to thinking in such terms themselves, of vividly imagining, and then enacting “in play,” possibilities of extreme violence and degradation, that they cannot imagine anyone growing up differently and not having such thoughts.

In this connection, the worst thing about violent interactive media may not be their contribution to real-world violence, but rather what they do to the human spirit, by burrowing deeply into the fabric of culture to corrupt the moral imagination. Peter Schumann, the founding director of the Bread and Puppet Theater, one of the few cultural bright spots in our wasteland of cultural debasement, says the following about the ways in which the original, healing gift of theater, that great legacy of civilization, has been

corrupted by the commodity culture of film and television: “The . . . aping of kitchen and bedroom intimacy, and [of] the intimacy of pain—that is what is so demeaning. Real pain in life is a serious relative of death, a terrorizer, usually a visitor of great consequence. The detailed, imitated pain in movies makes a mockery of the vital resources which enable our nature to fight pain or even submit to pain gracefully.”

Schumann’s reflections apply even more to video games, which go beyond inviting us to sit and watch spectacles of violence and degradation to actively enact them with our bodies and minds—compulsively, repetitively, thoughtlessly. Playing violent antisocial games, we come to believe that we are heroically defeating evil enemies. In reality, with every virtual bullet to the head, every virtual knife to the stomach, each virtual punch in the face, we are only laying siege to our own endangered humanity. By mocking suffering and pain, we ally ourselves symbolically and psychologically with the instruments of death, against the vital forces of life.

John Sanbonmatsu is an associate professor of philosophy at WPI.