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Simulation and Identity in Video Games

The future of interactive media is hard to imagine. Publicly, video games are most associated with adolescent males acting out violent rampages in fantasy worlds. Most people know that modern games mimic reality to an astonishing degree; they do not, however, fully understand the ways in which the experiences players have in virtual space may be affecting their real lives. There is much more to this relationship than the commonly cited link between violence in video games and real world aggression. I believe there is little risk associated with the often criticized ultra-violent games because they require little moral decision-making on the part of the player. These games are safe because they operate far outside what we know as our real-world moral framework. As virtual and real-world experiences increasingly overlap, however, morality in video games has now become an important issue. When a player commits a violent act while playing a game, with whom are they identifying with at that moment? The protagonist in the game? Or are they just being themselves?

The newest generation of video games is defined by virtual experiences that paradoxically feel more real than reality. With the proliferation of such hyper-realities, there now exist greater potential risks as well as greater possible benefits in game play. At some point the social structures and personal morals which define our real life experiences will begin to make their way into virtual worlds. While video games today have not yet fully reached this level of involvement, aspects of some games already exhibit this evolution.

Given America's rich history of rebellion and violence, it is not surprising that so many widely popular games allow the player to become a manifestation of classic American homicidal heroism. I've played the most violent first-person shooters out there: games in which you can blast off arms and legs, leaving severed limbs and intestines in your wake. These games, however, are not as bad as people assume. Most ultra-violent video games I've played give clear motivations for the violent acts I am about commit. Take for example the classic opening line to the game *Duke Nukem 3D*: "*Those alien bastards are gonna pay for ruining my ride.*" While often a bit overly simplistic, even this simple motivation lends moral context to the virtual situation. This allows players to actively dismiss their decisions as the character's decisions, thus freeing them from any sense of real moral responsibility. Interestingly, a player's entire moral schema is determined when he chooses his character. Mario or Luigi, Ken or Ryu—the differences may be trivial, but by identifying with a given character, the character's

belief system becomes the gamer's own, and he plays accordingly. This "moral displacement" also allows players to easily make complex moral decisions, because we are essentially role playing, making the choices we believe our game character would make in the given situation. So you run over a pedestrian, it's ok because if you don't get to the warehouse in time, the bad guys will kill your brother. Anything the player must do to accomplish his goals can be justified by the morals of the character. Thanks to moral displacement, the majority of ultra-violent video games pose little threat to most gamers.

A game with moral displacement isn't necessarily safe for everyone, however. To experience a sense of virtual morality, one needs a real world context against which to compare virtual choices. The fact that I had decent real-world role models and clear examples of good ethical choices helped prevent my virtual experiences from ever posing a threat to my sense of right and wrong. It's natural for children to experiment with their own conceptions of violence and death, and I don't think virtual experiences that simulate violent acts are fundamentally "bad" for one's adolescent development.[1] Kids who grow up playing video games without any sense of greater context, however, are obviously at greater risk of not properly understanding the motivations for their violent virtual actions.

Up until this point violence in video games has not posed a threat to most people, but a new type of game is beginning to challenge the safety of moral displacement. In the past few years the technology behind video games has started to allow for a more pronounced overlap between the virtual and the real. As gamers, we are now living by the same laws of physics, in the same cities, and doing many of the same things we once did in real life, only virtually. A new genre of games—simulation-based games—is designed to allow players to forgo the prescribed characters and essentially act as themselves. Today, you can live in a virtual house in the suburbs, eat, sleep, go to work, drive a car, fall in love, and eventually grow old—all within a game. Why would anyone want to play a game that so closely mirrors reality? There is something oddly empowering about actually authoring a virtual copy of yourself and then watching your video game clone do the things you could very well be doing instead of playing the game.

This phenomenon is conceivably a byproduct of a culture obsessed with technology and pop entertainment. It all begins to make sense when one considers how much of modern life is built around the experiences of others. We are a generation of TV bystanders. We enjoy reality TV because we can imagine ourselves there in the same situation, on the screen. Games which closely mirror the real world operate by the same principle, but with a game, unlike television, the viewer actually gets to control the action. Having control over action on a screen is an empowering experience, especially if the world that you control looks and operates very much like the real world.

Games as simulations of the real world fundamentally differ in many ways from the ultra-violent shoot-em-ups. Most importantly, there is no way to "beat" a simulation, no final boss fight or ultimate reward. The game isn't about winning. The experience of playing makes it enjoyable. For this reason these games can be played indefinitely. In *Sims 2*, the game characters actually age and eventually pass away, leaving behind their offspring to continue the game; this cycle can continue forever. Philosophically, this approach to virtual world design is much closer to real life experience. Arguably, there is no way to "win" at life. There may be challenges along the way, but in the end everyone is just trying to do what makes them happy.

Secondly, there is no virtual pre-prescribed character with whom to identify, just an open ended world onto which you can project your own personal motivations and ethics. The game does not give any imperatives or justifications for deviant behavior. When I first started playing *the Sims*, out of curiosity I trapped my wife in room with no windows or doors. She yelled and screamed, cried, and after a few days she starved to death. I was shocked and immediately overcome with guilt. There was no way to get her back, and it was entirely my fault. No one had told me to kill her; it was my own sick idea. In effect there is no preset moral displacement built into the game: who the characters are, and why they do the things they do, is almost entirely up to the player.

The next generation of games will feature virtual experiences which combine popular elements of both traditional, ultra-violent, linear plot-based games and open ended simulation games. The latest installment in the *Grand Theft Auto* series has been widely successful because the game is both a city simulation and a traditional action game. The game feels very "real": if you don't eat your character will loose weight, and if you get tired of your look you can go downtown and buy some new threads. At the same time, though, the game has a protagonist and a plot full of objectives and rewards.

Within this overlap of simulation and plot-driven games lies the greatest complication as well as the greatest potential of video games. Games like *Grand Theft Auto*, which blend these two very different game models, risk a potentially dangerous but fascinating blending of player and character. When a player is not taking part in the plot of the game and simply making his own decisions while exploring the virtual environment, the question arises: in which moral framework is the player/character operating? Are the player's choices justified by the morals of the character? Or, without the excuse of a plot-based objective, is the player making his own decisions? Maybe there is nothing wrong with (virtually) killing a prostitute with a baseball bat or (virtually) setting fire to window shoppers.

But when the motivation for these actions becomes blurred between game morals and real-world morals, a player's ability to differentiate between the real world and the virtual world may come into question. As players map their own ethical constructs onto the game, the game will reflect the challenges facing the protagonist back onto

the players. Just as we learn from the results of our real-life experiences, players are in essence learning social constructs from the game.

While this breakdown might pose a threat to how we see ourselves in the real world, it may also allow players to empathize with virtual characters in truly profound ways. It's time game developers began to take this potential into account and allow players to mix their own moral choices with those of the game character within the context of a consistent linear narrative. I'm not saying that designers should censor a player's ability to be violent, but I do think they should simultaneously provide opportunities for equally altruistic acts. *Grand Theft Auto* has tapped into this ideology, but is far from reaching its full potential. While the game allows the player to make his own decisions, the majority of free actions in the game are violent and/or anti-social; in *GTA* there are many more opportunities to kill another person than there are to save another's life. While implementing this dimension of game design may be tricky, it is the gateway to creating a greater level of empathy in virtual experiences.

The films and books that have the most impact help us to understand the circumstances of the characters and thus appeal to our sense of empathy. Great fictions are often stories of sacrifice, conflict, pain, guilt, etc. Now that we have games which so closely simulate real life, is it so absurd to imagine a game designed to reward (virtual) personal growth or (virtual) self-realization? Video game media could potentially be used to reinvent a much broader range of stories. Imagine Shakespeare in game form. Hamlet's desire for vengeance is arguably justified, thus the decision to end another's life remains a weighty issue. If the same gravity could be achieved in a game structure, interactive media could move players like never before. As a serious gamer, I want to play games that question my understanding of the real world and give significance to the virtual choices I make within the context of the story.

With the convergence of plot-based and simulation-based games we may experience virtual worlds which are more moving, rewarding, and enlightening than any other media. It is up to game developers to consider the moral directives of games, and to design games which foster a greater knowledge and understanding of the human condition. They can educate us, reward us for our curiosity, foster creativity, and, most importantly, teach us to learn through active exploration rather than passive absorption. All things considered, I believe there exists a great potential for video games to surpass any (virtual) experience as we know it.

Notes

While the video games have been found to cause short term increases in aggression, no comprehensive study has yet been conducted to determine the long-term effects of interactive virtual violence.