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Has Excessive Violence in Video Games Gone Too Far?

Kyra SyCip

May 24, 2021

Introduction

Numerous case studies and published research have led many gamers and non-gamers to wonder whether the excessive loads of violence found in video games is truly necessary for “fun” gameplay and entertainment. Controversies have been arising within famous video games such as the Grand Theft Auto series, Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, and Six Days in Fallujah. These three games have been the subject of numerous present day debates and have sparked many arguments within the gaming community. As well as the debate of whether these games are indeed harmful to the player’s psychology and nature has yet to be determined, and will possibly forever be debated by scholars, and video game players. This brief but detailed analysis will analyze and study these three games and the potential impact they may have on the human psyche, and if the extreme loads of violence is necessary for fun gameplay. Most notably, this analysis is meant to bring to question why violence is deemed necessary in video games in order to be perceived as fun and if the line has been too far passed in the context of “justifiable violence” in the form of entertainment.

Research

The Grand Theft Auto video game series has been present and famous in the gaming industry since October of 1997 (Wikipedia contributors, “Grand Theft Auto”). This game is based on an action-adventure based playing style and utilizes automobiles as one of the main elements. The player begins the game as a character that is essentially trying to move up the ranks of various organized crime groups by completing numerous tasks and missions. These “missions,” are primarily based on participating in or perpetrating violent crimes within the game space. Some of which even allows running over pedestrians or even law enforcement members to “escape,” and win the level in order to move on in the game (Wikipedia contributors, 2021c).

This has caught the attention of many critics and concerned individuals over whether the Grand Theft Auto series is indirectly or directly encouraging violence to their audience. It was condemned in many European countries and even banned in Brazil according to Wikipedia. This game series is unique in the sense that it offers an “open-ended,” form of gameplay, which allows the player to make most of their own decisions in reaching the end of the narrative element (DeVane & Squire, 2008). This is important because it allows the player to essentially decide how violent they want to be with their character whilst playing, and it provides the choice to the player with presenting the opportunities. However you may view this, as harmless or not, the question of whether this is even necessary for a young person playing this game or any game like the Grand Theft Auto series is a truly positive environment for growth and development. If it is not intended to be positive, then why do we promote it as a pleasurable form of pastime?

Since 1997, Grand Theft Auto has had seven different game releases and multiple expansion packs. It is the fourth highest grossing game in the world next to famous leaders such as Mario Kart (Wikipedia contributors, 2021c). This begs the question of why this game is so popular if it is so unnecessarily violent? The answer that “fake” violence is just merely a harmless form of pastime has been debated between scholars on whether it has any mental or physical effect on the human psyche. According to a case study from 2008, when Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, the fifth installment to the series was released there was mass media coverage discussing the debate over whether or not the gaming industry has taken the violence within the game too far (DeVane & Squire, 2008). Research showed both contrasting outcomes of whether young children who played the game developed poor behavioural characteristics from playing or if there was any causal relationship between their cognitive abilities development or behavior (DeVane & Squire, 2008). Regardless of the research, many can wonder if the Grand

Theft Auto series set a precedent for other games to outdo the other with violence. Considering how many other game series encourage considerably the same number of violent scenarios, but perhaps does not present them in the same way, leaves more questioning of whether the advancement of digital gaming has been heading down a dark road longer than we could have thought.

In 2009, Atomic Games announced a new game titled *Six Days in Fallujah*, based on the six-day long battle in Iraq fought by US and British military forces against Al Qaeda that left numerous casualties on all sides (Valentine, 2021). This brought forth tremendous criticism not just from the media but actual survivors and military agents who were a part of this battle, believing that it was a cruel act to try and recreate an already controversial battle for gaming entertainment (Valentine, 2021). The game was dropped by its creator only a month later, but has now then resurfaced on the media because the project has been rebooted by new creators for a launch set for this year (Valentine, 2021). According to Rebekah Valentine, a contributor for IGN, claims that

Seven years later in 2016, former Atomic Games CEO Peter Tamte formed his own publishing studio, Victura, to support the game's 2021 reemergence with developer Highwire Games at the helm. Today's *Six Days in Fallujah* is, per the game's own website, "a first-person tactical military shooter that recreates true stories of Marines, Soldiers, and Iraqi civilians who fought Al Qaeda during the toughest urban battle since 1968." (Valentine, 2021)

Not only did the game receive a reboot, an entire publishing studio was created to support the launch of *Six Days in Fallujah*. Ongoing conversations and debates have been formed over this controversial video game that is intended purely for simulation and entertainment, but at what

cost? Does this game belittle the realities that our armed forces and troops went through in order for others to “experience,” what it was like to be there in the midst of that horrific battle?

Regardless of the political issues that are tied to this battle, this resurfaces the question regarding whether or not the violence within video games is truly important in order to be entertained. And to what end will game creators go in order to fuel their audience with entertainment, leisure, and supposedly harmless pastime?

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 sparked tremendous controversy in 2009 when they included a level titled “No Russian,” that places the player in the first-person perspective of the terrorists and directed to shoot at unarmed civilians (Hester, 2019). This Call of Duty game series is based on a CIA Agent and British SAS that work together to defeat and expose the villainous Russian groups that have entered into the country (Wikipedia contributors, 2021a). According to Blake Hester, a contributor for US Gamer, explains that in order to fully understand why this level was even conceived let alone put into the game is crucial in order to at the very least comprehend why the creators of the game felt the need to allow this in the first place. Hester claims that Jesse Stern, the creator of COD: Modern Warfare and Modern Warfare 2, wanted to explore what it would be like to place the player in a populated area and branch off of that idea into what became known as “No Russian.” He states that,

Asking players to take part in a mass shooting, Stern says, was a response to the way Americans talked about terrorists post-September 11. It was dehumanizing, he says, a way to put a gap between ourselves and the "monsters" who commit these acts. "We wanted to bridge that gap a little bit and say, 'Let's put you in some place you never thought you could go,'" he explains. "'Let's put you in some place'—which is what video

games do in a lot of ways, as opposed to the fantasy element or the wish-fulfillment element—'let's put you someplace that you can't even imagine being.'" (Hester, 2019). Even if you gave Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2's "No Russian" level the benefit of the doubt, it would not necessarily justify the need to include it in a game that has such a large percentage of young adult aged players. Although certain countries have banned this level entirely from the game, it does not hide the fact that other countries still have access to it and can even watch others play this level online. According to Hester, the game does allow the player to "opt out" of the level, and you can skip it entirely and still move seamlessly through to the next level. This is at the very least decent of the game makers to put in for players to have the choice of engaging in such a sensitive simulated scenario. But it begs further questions of whether even giving players of any age the opportunity to imagine themselves in a situation like "No Russian" is healthy for any person watching or playing.

Application

In the year of 2021 when unarmed individuals have been the victims of numerous heinous crimes, it is interesting that there is such little change within the gaming industry to change or alter the narrative of their games when it comes to such sensitive topics and scenes. This brings us back to the idea that video games have seemingly been increasing the level of extreme violence within the gaming industry and community. Merely pleasure and entertainment does not seem like a justifiable reason anymore for the level of controversies and sensitive topics that video games have been dabbling with for the last twenty years. Though it is every game maker's right to create what they deem is fit for their game's aesthetics and thematics, it brings to question their intentions of bringing an audience together to engage in what is presented and advertised as innocent and harmless gameplay. How do we know for sure that there is zero

psychological impact on the players, especially the younger-aged audience? Are game makers feeding into an incessant need for violence within games, causing players to believe that without violence there is no worthy form of playable entertainment?

According to a study by Robert Sparrow and other contributors, he included a brief overview of scientific data analyses that all of which contradict each other. He states that,

The fact that even meta-analyses of research on the relation between playing digital games and player behavior contradict each other, alongside the fact that, as we have already noted, the academic community researching the matter is so strongly polarized, suggests that it may be many years before further empirical research settles the question—if it ever does. For this reason, we believe that a form of “immanent critique” in the context of the broader cultural controversy over video game violence, focusing on tensions between the claims made by manufacturers and proponents of digital games, may have a useful role to play in advancing the debate on the topic. (Sparrow, Harrison, Oakley, & Keogh, 2018)

This proves that there is no way of knowing whether or not there is truly a scientific connection between violent acts and the violence within video games, but there is a connection between the need for violence and the addiction to video games. However manufacturers are the ones to bring into question for allowing these extreme levels of violence into these popular games such as COD, GTA, and Six Days in Fallujah.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this analysis, it is clear of at least one thing that if there has ever been a time with an unnecessary amount of violence within video games, it would be no greater than in the twenty-first century. As much as we can discuss and debate the game creator’s intentions of

including such violence in their games, we also have to address the player's who enjoy it. Video games are the root of the addiction for the players, but the game makers are the cause for the need and they have taken the advantage. Their reasoning for allowing extreme violence is yet to be understood fully, but we can continue to question and debate in order to fully comprehend why we are tolerating this in a society that is so against reasonless violence. The Grand Theft Auto series, COD: Modern Warfare 2, and Six Days in Fallujah are only a few of many cases of controversies that have been reported over the last two decades. It is important to encourage this ongoing debate to continue the conversation between non-video game players and video game players so that we can better understand one another. But the main questioning should be still very much towards the game makers and their intentions of bringing such unnecessary extreme violence into the gaming industry.

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