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Ethics of Video Games – Violence

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**A Culture of Violence**

A Perspective using Libertarian Ethics

Our culture has always had a fixation around violence, but never before have we seen violence portrayed in fictitious realities become so lifelike that they have begun to cause problems, both large and small, within our society. Games like *Call of Duty*, *Halo*, and Battlefield, among many others, all underscore the obsession that pop culture has with violence, death, and killing, and even more astonishing, some portray these acts in a humorous socially-acceptable fashion. What is not surprising, however, is that studies are beginning to prove the behavioral problems that are being cultivated by these violent mediums of entertainment, and as many of us have seen in the news, these forms of entertainment are undoubtedly a factor leading to increased aggression in society, and even influence some to reenact the violence they take part in within the video games in real life. This has led our nation to enter into a discourse about the problems that violence in video games, and what might be done about it. This dialogue also leads into another just as important discussion, that being the ethical issues involved in limiting or censoring video games, and if any action should be taken at all. It is this issue, and the problems caused by it, that when looked at through the scope of libertarianism leads to the answer that video games and the people who play them should not be restricted, no matter how many behavioral issues or problems they cause.

It should hardly be surprising, that there has been an increase in aggression in the last few years within the general populace, of which some blame can be held by video games, especially those that positively portray violence. This problem even goes so far on acting on the younger generations, who are now growing up around a virtual world of hidious acts of violence, pain and death. In her article, “Violent Video games linked to child aggression,” Anne Harding states “kids in both the U.S. and Japan who reported playing lots of violent video games had more aggressive behavior months later than their peers who did not.” An even more stunning fact however, is that “90 percent of U.S. kids ages 8 to 16 play video games, and they spend about 13 hours a week doing so (more if you’re a boy),” and that this increase is also proving to show these kids are becoming “more aggressive in real life.” (Harding) What is even more perturbing, however, is that in his article, “Violent Video Games: Myths, Facts, and Unanswered Questions,” Craig Anderson, points that even video games with an “E-rating (suitable for everyone)” are showing aggressive increases in college students. (Anderson)

Violent video games, and the ratings that are attached to them are no longer the problem, as it seems, but rather that it is almost every game, no matter the content, that is bringing out unnatural aggressive tensions in people across the age spectrum. As many are beginning to point out, many, if not most games seems to be becoming a huge problem, as it desensitizes and increases anger related issues in those playing them, (LeJacq) but put on top of the fact that companies are investing themselves in finding ways to increase how addictive their games are, this problem becomes even more worrisome. As Yannick LeJacq goes onto exclaim in his article, “Proposed ban on violent video games in public spaces faces legal problems,” violent video games, and the ratings and age group associated with them, are becoming a massive problem that faces today's “pop culture,” and will likely be one that will continue to grow in size and seriousness in the years to come.

The priority of this growing predicament has led many to ask the question as to what can be done about the increase in violent video games and the multitude of problems that come along with it. Many, like Matt McCormick, in his article “Is it wrong to play violent video games?,” beg the question, if it is “morally objectionable” to play “violent video games.” (McCormick 1) The libertarian standpoint on this would more than likely say that those that choose to participate in the playing of the games, do so by their free will, and thus are accountable to any consequences from playing the games. An individual, as a libertarian might describe, should be free to make the decisions they want to, so that their liberty and freedom is preserved. This can be seen in the words of Sandel, as he states on page 60 of his book, that we have “the right to do whatever we want with the things we own, provided we respect other people’s right to do the same.” The underlying element here, and one of the principles that many libertarians stand upon, is that there should be little to no “paternalism.” As Sandel exclaims, “libertarians oppose laws to protect people from harming themselves... libertarians argue that such laws violate the right of the individual to decide what risks to assume.” (Sandel 60) Undoubtedly, they would apply this to not only things such as drug use, prostitution, or organ selling, but also to video games, where people decide to play them, and as such, they “assume” all the “risks” associated with them. On the grounds of libertarian values, McCormick question about video games being “morally objectionable” would be answered, and people would be free to exercise their freedom to play these violent games, regardless of the consequences they bring upon themselves. (McCormick 1)

There is another question, however, that has been posed in the discourse of what should be done about violent games, that being whether banning the violent material found in video games is ethical and moral action, and should be done, or if it should be protected. Politically, as LeJacq points out in his article, much of the legislation for banning violent video games is facing problems as it is seen as a violation of the first amendment. (LeJacq) In short, as many libertarians would agree, the right to free speech should be preserved, as it allows for greater freedom within a society, and thus video games should be unrestricted in the material that they expose.

Finally, we can look at the principles of moral and ethical decisions enforced through legislation. We can also look at a libertarian's viewpoint on what a “victim-less crime” is, and whether or not they should be regulated. The Libertarian Party's political platform, which closely imbues the philosophy of libertarian ideals, states that “only actions that infringe on the rights of others can properly be termed crimes, we favor the repeal of all federal, state, and local laws creating 'crimes' without victims.” (Libertarian Party) As such, violent video games, and the actual playing of them harm no one but the person participating in the act, should not be regulated and made a “victim-less crime.” Libertarians make the point that people are responsible for their own actions, whether they be moral or not, and that that is their liberty as a human being. As Sandel points out again in his book, the fundamental libertarian principle is that there should be no “moral legislation,” and there should be no “coercive force of law to promote notions of virtue or to express the moral convictions of the majority.” (Sandel 60) People, when looked at through the scope of libertarian philosophy, should be able to make their own decisions, and morals should not be created or enforced by the ones in power.

Violent forms of entertainment are becoming a major problem within today’s pop culture around the world, and the consequences of these actions are starting to take on very real and very painful effects. These repercussions range from increases in aggressive behavior, all the way to these games being a factor in such public tragedies as school and airport shootings. Many, such as McCormick and LeJacq are posing the questions of whether or not playing these games is moral, and even further, whether or not it is even moral to make these games. It is the libertarian’s standpoint, that these games, along with any other violent form of media should be protected. Those that choose to participate in these forms of media, under their philosophy, also do so under their own choosing, and thus assume any consequences related to doing so. Overall, even though these violent video games prove to be a large problem that the public good should possibly be invested in, when looked at through the libertarian’s philosophy, little to nothing should be done to inhibit those playing of these games or be done to censor any of their content, for both would be a major violation on everyone’s liberty and the right to choose what their well-being entails.

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