

The War Between Effects and Meaning: Rethinking the Video Game Violence Debate

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Suppose a federal judge was asked to determine whether books were protected by the First Amendment. Instead of seeking expert testimony, examining the novel's historical evolution, or surveying the range of the local bookstore, the judge chooses four books, all within the same genre, to stand for the entire medium. Teachers and librarians would rise up in outrage. So, where were you when they tried to take the games away?

On April 19, 2002, U.S. District Judge Stephen N. Limbaugh, Sr. ruled that video games have "no conveyance of ideas, expression or anything else that could possibly amount to speech," and thus enjoy no constitutional protection. Limbaugh had been asked to evaluate the constitutionality of a Saint Louis law that restricted youth access to violent or sexually explicit content. Constitutional status has historically rested on a medium's highest potential, not its worst excesses. Limbaugh essentially reversed this logic, saying that unless all games expressed ideas, then no game should be protected.

The judge did not look hard for meaning in games, having already decided (again, contrary to well-established legal practice) that works whose primary purpose was to entertain could not constitute artistic or political expression. Saint Louis County had presented the judge with videotaped excerpts from four games, all within a narrow range of genres and all the subject of previous controversy.

Gamers have expressed bafflement over how Limbaugh can simultaneously claim that video games do not express ideas and that they represent

a dangerous influence on American youth. Reformers, in turn, are perplexed that the defenders of games can argue that they have no direct consequences for the people who consume them and yet warrant constitutional protection. To understand this paradox, we have to recognize a distinction between *effects* and *meanings*. Limbaugh and company see games as having social and psychological effects (or, in some formulations, as constituting risk factors that increase the likelihood of violent and antisocial conduct). Their critics argue that gamers produce meanings through game play and related activities. Effects are seen as emerging more or less spontaneously, with little conscious effort, and are not accessible to self-examination. Meanings emerge through an active process of interpretation—they reflect our conscious engagement, they can be articulated into words, and they can be critically examined. New meanings take shape around what we already know and what we already think, and thus each player will come away from a game with a different experience and interpretation. Often reformers in the effects tradition argue that children are particularly susceptible to confusions between fantasy and reality. A focus on meaning, however, would emphasize the knowledge and competencies possessed by game players, starting with their mastery over the aesthetic conventions that distinguish games from real-world experience.

I do not come at this debate between the effects and meanings models as a neutral observer. Based on my research into the place of video games in boy culture, I testified before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee about “marketing violent entertainment to youth.” I went around the country speaking at high schools and listening to what students, parents, and teachers had to say about the place of violent entertainment in their lives. I conducted a series of creative leaders workshops at trade shows and individual companies designed to foster innovation, diversity, and artistic responsibility within the games industry. I helped to found a major research initiative, The Education Arcade (www.educationarcade.org), which seeks to examine games’ educational potential and foster media literacy training. I was 1 of more than 30 scholars from different disciplines who filed an amicus brief contesting and helping to overturn the Limbaugh decision. So, in many ways, this chapter is a report from the front lines.

The Limbaugh decision was reversed by higher courts, and the Saint Louis ordinance seems to be dead for the moment. Yet similar city and state regulations are being proposed and contested. We have not heard the end of this debate. Often these policy discussions filter down into decisions being made in our schools, such as how to draft digital policies (which may allow or exclude the use of games in computer labs or dorm rooms) or whether game playing constitutes a warning sign of antisocial personalities.

The educational significance—and potential value—of games is partly a consequence of their growing importance in young people’s lives. The Pew

Internet and American Life Center (2003) reported the results of a survey of more than 1,000 undergraduates from 27 American colleges and universities. One hundred percent of respondents had played computer games; 65% described themselves as regular or occasional gamers. Regardless of whether you know it, experiences in game playing are thus an increasingly important part of what students are bringing with them into the classroom. In this chapter, I want to first consider the claims about education that are being made in the public policy debates about video games. Both sides talk about games as "teaching machines," but what they mean by learning, education, and teaching differs dramatically. Second, I want to describe some contemporary efforts to use games as a springboard for discussing and learning about the place of violence within our culture.

THE EFFECTS MODEL

Grossman (2000), a retired military psychologist and West Point instructor, argued that video games are teaching kids to kill in more or less the same ways that the military trains soldiers. He identified "brutalization, classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and role modeling" as the basic mechanisms by which boot camps prepare raw recruits for the battlefield. Each of these methods, he suggested, have their parallels in the ways players interact with computer games. Kids are "brutalized" by overexposure to representations of violence at an age when they cannot yet distinguish between representation and reality. They are "conditioned" by being consistently rewarded for in-game violence. Soldiers in boot camp rehearse what they are going to do on the battlefield until it becomes second nature. Similarly, Grossman claimed, "Every time a child plays an interactive point-and-shoot video game, he is learning the exact same conditioned reflex and motor skills" (n.p.). According to Grossman, such "practice" helped prepare school shooters for the real-world violence they would commit:

This young man did exactly what he was conditioned to do: he reflexively pulled the trigger, shooting accurately just like all those times he played video games. This process is extraordinarily powerful and frightening. The result is ever more homemade pseudo-sociopaths who kill reflexively and show no remorse. Our children are learning to kill and learning to like it. (n.p.)

Finally, Grossman argued, soldiers learn by mimicking powerful role models, and players learn by imitating the behaviors they see modeled on the screen. Indeed, given the first-person framing of such games, they are pulling the trigger from the minute the game starts.

So, where is meaning, interpretation, evaluation, or expression in Grossman's model? Grossman assumed almost no conscious cognitive activity on the part of the gamers, who have all of the self-consciousness of Pavlov's dogs. He reverted to a behaviorist model of education that has long been discredited among schooling experts. Grossman saw games as shaping our reflexes, impulses, and emotions almost without regard to our previous knowledge and experience. It is precisely because such conditioning escapes any conscious policing that Grossman believed games represent such a powerful mechanism for reshaping our behavior. Educational psychologist Provenzo (2001) adopted a similar position:

The computer or video game is a teaching machine. Here is the logic: highly skilled players learn the lessons of the game through practice. As a result, they learn the lesson of the machine and its software—and thus achieve a higher score. They are behaviorally reinforced as they play the game and thus they are being taught. (n.p.)

Again, the model is one of stimulus-response, not conscious reflection.

Grossman reaffirmed the distaste many educators feel for the contents of popular culture and cagily exploited liberal discomfort with the military mindset. Many teachers feel angry that time spent playing games often comes at the expense of what they would see as more educationally or culturally beneficial activities. Yet if we think critically about the claims Grossman made, they would seem to be at odds with our own classroom experiences and with what we know about how education works.

As a teacher, I may fantasize about being able to decide exactly what I want my students to know and transmit that information to them with sufficient skill and precision that every student in the room learns exactly what I want. But real-world education does not work that way. Each student pays attention to some parts of the lesson and ignores or forgets others. Each has his or her own motivations for learning. Previous understandings and experience color how they interpret my words. Some students may disregard my words altogether. There is a huge difference between education and indoctrination.

Add to that the fact that consumers do not sit down in front of their game consoles to learn a lesson. Their attention is even more fragmented; their goals are even more personal; they are not really going to be tested on what they learn. They tend to dismiss anything they encounter in fantasy or entertainment that is not consistent with what they believe to be true about the real world. The military uses the games as part of a specific curriculum with clearly defined goals, in a context where students actively want to learn and have a clear need for the information and skills being transmitted. Soldiers have signed up to defend their country with their lives, so there are

clear consequences for not mastering those skills. Grossman's model only works if we assume that players are not capable of rational thought, ignore critical differences in how and why people play games, and remove training or education from any meaningful cultural context.

THE MEANINGS MODEL

Humanistic researchers have also made the case that games can be powerful teaching tools. In his recent book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Gee (2003) described game players as active problem solvers who see mistakes as opportunities for learning and reflection and who are constantly searching for newer, better solutions to obstacles and challenges. Players are encouraged to constantly form and test hypotheses about the game world. Players are pushed to the outer limits of their abilities, but rarely in a good game beyond them. Increasingly, games are designed to be played successfully by players with very different goals and skill sets.

For Gee, the most powerful dimension of game playing is what he called *projective identity*, which refers to the way that role-playing enables us to experience the world from alternative perspectives. Terminology here is key: Identity is projected (chosen or at least accepted by the player, actively constructed through game play), rather than imposed. Gee, for example, discussed *Ethnic Cleansing*, a game designed by Aryan Nation to foster White supremacy. For many students, he noted, playing the game will encourage critical thinking about the roots of racism and reaffirm their own commitments to social justice, rather than provoking race hatred. Whether the game's ideas are persuasive depends on the players' backgrounds, experiences, and previous commitments. Games, like other media, are most powerful when they reinforce our existing beliefs and least effective when they challenge our values.

Although Provenzo worries about players being forced to conform to machine logic, Gee suggested that our active participation enables us to map our own goals and agendas into the game space. To some degree, they are talking about games of different technological generations—the simple early games, which amount to little more than digital shooting galleries, versus the more robust and expansive universes created by more recent game genres. But they are also adopting very different models of the kinds of learning that occurs through games.

Another humanistic researcher, Squire (2004), has been studying what kinds of things game players might learn about social studies through playing *Civilization III* (the third game in Sid Meier's best-selling *Civilization* series) in classroom environments. His work provides a vivid account of how

game-based learning builds on players' existing beliefs and takes shape within a cultural context. Students can win the game several different ways, roughly lining up with political, scientific, military, cultural, or economic victories. Players seek out geographical resources, manage economies, plan the growth of their civilization, and engage in diplomacy with other nation-states. Squire's research has focused on students performing well below grade-level expectations. They largely hated social studies, which they saw as propaganda. Several minority students were not interested in playing the game—until they realized that it was possible to win the game playing as an African or Native American civilization. These kids took great joy in studying hypothetical history, exploring the conditions under which colonial conquests might have played out differently. Squire's study showed that teachers played an important role in learning, directing students' attention, shaping questions, and helping them interpret events. An important part of the teacher's role was to set the tone of the activity—to frame game play as an investigation into alternative history as opposed to just learning directly from the game.

Squire asked what meanings these students take from playing games and what factors—in the game, in the player, and in the classroom environment—shape the interpretations they form. These kids are taught to explore their environment, make connections between distinct developments, form interpretations based on making choices and playing out their consequences, and map those lessons onto their understanding of the real world. Might something similar be occurring when players engage with violent video games? Might they be setting their own goals, working through their own emotional questions, forming their own interpretations, talking about them with their friends, and testing them against their observations of the real world?

As we move games into the classroom, teachers can play a vital role in helping students to become more conscious about the assumptions shaping their simulations. Yet such issues crop up spontaneously online where gamers gather to talk strategy or share game-playing experiences. Just as classroom culture plays a key role in shaping how learning occurs, the social interactions between players, what we call meta-gaming, is a central factor shaping the meanings they ascribe to the represented actions. Almost 60% of frequent video game players play with friends, 33% play with siblings, and 25% play with spouses or parents (Entertainment Software Association, 2003). As Friedman (1999) noted in regard to *Civilization*, players need to know how the game thinks (and the blind spots in its assumptions) to beat it. This means that as players discuss how to win games, they are also thinking about the assumptions underlying rule systems and simulations.

Sociologist Wright (2002) logged many hours observing how online communities interact with violent video games, concluding that meta-gaming

provides a context for thinking about rules and rule breaking. There are really two games taking place simultaneously—one, the explicit conflict and combat on the screen, the other, the implicit cooperation and comradeship between the players. Two players may be fighting to death on screen and growing closer as friends off screen. Within the magic circle (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003), then, we can let go of one set of constraints on our actions because we have bought into another set of constraints—the rules of society give way to the rules of the game. Social expectations are reaffirmed through the social contract governing play even as they are symbolically cast aside within the transgressive fantasies represented within the games.

Comparative Media Studies graduate student Li (2003) researched the online communities that grew up around *America's Army*, an online game developed as part of the U.S. Military's recruitment efforts. Li even interviewed players as the first bombs were being dropped on Baghdad. Veterans and current GIs were often critical of the casual and playful attitudes with which nonmilitary people play the game. For the veterans, playing the game represented a place to come together and talk about the way that war had impacted their lives. Many discussions surrounded the design choices the military made to promote official standards of behavior, such as preventing players from *fragging* teammates in the back or rewarding them for ethical and valorous behavior. The military had built the game to get young people excited about military service. They had created something more—a place where civilians and service folk could discuss the serious experience of real-life war.

[Games do represent powerful tools for learning—if we understand learning in a more active, meaning-driven sense. The problem comes when we make too easy an assumption about what is being learned just by looking at the surface features of the games. As Jones (2002) noted in his book, *Killing Monsters*, media reformers tend to be incredibly literal minded in reading game images, whereas players are not.] He wrote, “in focusing so intently on the literal, we overlook the emotional meaning of stories and images. . . . Young people who reject violence, guns, and bigotry in every form can sift through the literal contents of a movie, game, or song and still embrace the emotional power at its heart” (p. 11).

MEANINGFUL VIOLENCE?

Not every gamer thinks deeply about his or her play experiences, nor does every designer reflect on the meanings attached to violence in his or her work. Most contemporary games do little to encourage players to reflect and converse about the nature of violence. If anything, the assumption that game play is meaningless discourages rather than fosters such reflection.

Media reformers often fail to make even the most basic distinctions about different kinds of representations of violence (Heins, 2002). For example, The American Academy of Pediatrics (2001) reported that 100% of all animated feature films produced in the United States between 1937 and 1999 portrayed violence. For this statistic to be true, the researcher must define *violence* so broadly as to be meaningless. Does violence that occurs when hunters shoot Bambi's mother mean the same thing as the violence that occurs when giant robots smash each other in a Japanese anime movie, for example? What percentage of books taught in English classes would be deemed violent by these same criteria? The reform groups are battling a monolith, media violence, rather than helping our culture to make meaningful distinctions between different ways of representing violence.

In its 2002 decision striking down an Indianapolis law regulating youth access to violent games, the Federal Court of Appeals (Pozner, 2001) noted:

Violence has always been and remains a central interest of humankind and a recurrent, even obsessive theme of culture both high and low. It engages the interest of children from an early age, as anyone familiar with the classic fairy tales collected by Grimm, Andersen, and Perrault are aware. To shield children right up to the age of 18 from exposure to violent descriptions and images would not only be quixotic, but deforming; it would leave them unequipped to cope with the world as we know it. (n.p.)

Historically, cultures have used stories to make sense of the senseless acts of violence. Telling stories about violence can, in effect, remove some of its sting and help us comprehend acts that shatter our normal frames of meaning. When culture warriors and media reformers cite examples of violent entertainment, they are almost always drawn to works that are explicitly struggling with the meaning of violence—works that have won critical acclaim or cult status in part because they break with the formulas through which our culture normally employs violence. They rarely cite banal, formulaic, or aesthetically uninteresting works, although such works abound in the marketplace. It is as if the reformers are responding to the work's own invitations to struggle with the costs and consequences of violence, yet their literal-minded critiques suggest an unwillingness to deal with those works with any degree of nuance. These works are condemned for what they depict, not examined for what they have to say.

Like all developing media, the earliest games relied on fairly simple-minded and formulaic representations of violence. Many games were little more than shooting galleries where players were encouraged to blast everything that moves. As game designers have discovered and mastered their medium, they have become increasingly reflective about the player's experience of violent fantasy. Many current games are designed to be ethical

testing grounds; the discussions around such games provide a context for reflection on the nature of violence.

The Columbine shootings and their aftermath provoked soul searching within the games industry—more than might meet the eye to someone watching shifts in games content from the outside. As game designers grappled with their own ethical responsibilities, they have increasingly struggled to find ways to introduce some moral framework or some notion of consequence into their work. Because these designers work within industrial constraints and well-defined genres, these changes are subtle, not necessarily the kinds of changes that generate headlines or win the approval of reform groups. Yet they impact on the game play and have sparked debate among designers, critics, and players.

TOWARD MORE REFLECTIVE GAME DESIGN

Games, according to *Sims* designer Will Wright (personal interview), are perhaps the only medium that allows us to experience guilt over the actions of fictional characters. In a movie, because we do not control what occurs, we can always pull back and condemn the character or artist when he or she crosses social taboos, but in playing a game we choose what happens to the characters. In the right circumstances, we can be encouraged to examine our own values by seeing what we are willing to do within virtual space. Wright's own contribution has been to introduce a rhetoric of mourning into the video game. In *The Sims*, if a character dies, the surviving characters grieve over their loss. Such images are powerful reminders that death has human costs.

Wright has compared *The Sims* to a dollhouse within which we can reenact domestic rituals and dramas. As such, he evokes a much older tradition of doll play. In the 19th century (Formanek-Brunnell, 1998), doll funerals were a recognized part of the culture of doll play—a way children worked through their anxieties about infant mortality or, later, the massive deaths caused by the Civil War. Today, players use *The Sims* as a psychological workshop, testing the limits of the simulation (often by acting out violent fantasies among the residents), but also using the simulation to imitate real-world social interactions. As *The Sims* has moved online, it has become a social space where players debate alternative understandings of everyday life. Some see the fantasy world as freeing them from constraints and consequences. Others see the online game as a social community that must define and preserve a social contract. These issues have come to a head as some players have banded together into organized crime families seeking to rule territories, while others have become law enforcers trying to protect their fledgling communities.

The representations and simulations of games become more sophisticated, enabling players to set their own goals within richly detailed and highly responsive environments, and the opportunities for ethical reflection have grown. *Morrowind*, a fantasy role-playing game, gives characters memories across their family line. Christopher Weaver (personal interview), founder of Bethesda Softworks, which produced the game, explains that he wanted to show the "interconnectedness of lives" in a society governed by strong loyalties to families or clans: "The underlying social message being that one may not know the effect of their actions upon the future, but one must guide their present actions with an awareness of such potential ramifications."

Grand Theft Auto 3 is one of the most controversial games on the market today because of its vivid representations of violence (Jenkins, 2002). Yet it also represents a technical breakthrough in game design, which may lead toward more meaningful representations of violence in games. The protagonist has escaped from prison. What kind of life is he going to build for himself? The player interacts with more than 60 distinctive characters and must choose between a range of possible alliances with various gangs and crime syndicates. Every object responds as it would in the real world; the player can exercise enormous flexibility in where they can go and what they can do in this environment. Certain plot devices cue possible missions, which include expectations of violence, but nothing stops the player from stealing an ambulance and racing injured people to the hospital, grabbing a fire truck and putting out blazes, or simply walking around town. Some of what happens is outrageous and offensive, but this open-ended structure puts the burden on the user to make choices and explore their consequences. If you choose to use force, you are going to attract the police. The more force, the more cops. Pretty soon you are going down. Every risk you take comes with a price. Violence leaves physical marks. Early on, players act out, seeing how much damage and mayhem they can inflict, but more experienced players tell me they often see how long they can go without breaking any laws, viewing this as a harder and more interesting challenge. A richer game might offer a broader range of options, including allowing the player to go straight, get a job, and settle into the community.

Peter Molyneux designs games that encourage ethical reflection. In *Black and White*, the player functions as a god-like entity, controlling the fates of smaller creatures. Your moral decisions to help or abuse your creatures map themselves directly onto the game world: Malicious actions make the environment darker and more gnarly, whereas virtuous actions make the world flower and glisten. Most players find it hard to be purely good or purely evil; most enter into ethical gray areas and, in so doing, start to ask some core philosophical and theological questions. His newest game, *Fable*, takes its protagonist from adolescence to old age, and every choice along

the way has consequences in terms of the kind of person you will become and the kind of world you will inhabit. If you work out, you will grow muscles. If you pig out, you will get fat. If you carve your initials in a tree, the tree remains scarred as it grows. If you trample your seedlings, the trees will not grow. By living an accelerated lifetime within the game world, teens get to see the long-term impact of their choices on their own lives and those of people around them.

FOSTERING GAMES LITERACY

If design innovations are producing games that support more reflection and discussion, media literacy efforts can expand the frameworks and vocabulary players bring to those discussions. Around the country, people are beginning to experiment with both classroom and after-school programs designed to foster games literacy. The best such programs combine critical analysis of existing commercial games with media production projects that allow students to re-imagine and re-invent game content. What kids learn is that current commercial games tell a remarkably narrow range of stories and adopt an even narrower range of perspectives on the depicted events. Rethinking game genres can encourage greater diversity and, in doing so, introduce new contexts for thinking about game violence.

OnRampArts, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit arts organization, conducted an after-school violence-prevention workshop for students at Belmont High School, a 90% Latino public school in downtown Los Angeles. Students critiqued existing games, trying to develop a vocabulary for talking about the ways they represented the world. Students created digital superhero characters (like a rock-playing guerilla fighter, a man who transforms into a low-rider, or a peace-loving mermaid) that reflected their own cultural identities and built digital models of their homes and communities as a means of thinking about game space. Students studied their family histories and turned immigration stories into game missions, puzzles, and systems. In other words, they imagined games that might more fully express their own perspectives and experiences.

In the second phase, students, teachers, and local artists worked together to create a web game, *Tropical America*. Because so many of the kids working on the project were first- or second-generation immigrants, the project increasingly came to focus on the conquest and colonization of the Americas. Jessica Irish, one of the project's directors, said that the greatest debate centered around what kind of role the protagonist should play. Through resolving that question, students came away with a more powerful understanding of the meaning and motivation of violence in games.

In *Tropical America*, the player assumes the role of the sole survivor of a 1981 massacre in El Salvador, attempting to investigate what happened to

this village and why. In the process, you explore some 500 years of the history of the colonization of Latin America, examining issues of racial genocide, cultural dominance, and the erasure of history. Winners of the game become Heroes of the Americas and, in the process, uncover the name of another victim of the actual slaughter. Students had to master the history, distilling it down to core events and concepts, and determine what images or activities might best express the essence of those ideas. They enhanced the game play with an encyclopedia that allowed players to learn more about the historical references and provided a space where meta-gaming could occur. Rather than romanticizing violence, the kids dealt with the political violence and human suffering that led their parents to flee from Latin America.

CONCLUSION

Rethinking the debates about media violence in terms of meanings rather than effects has pushed us in two important directions. On the one hand, it has helped us see how game designers and players are rethinking the consequences of violence within existing commercial games. These shifts in thinking may be invisible as long as the debate is framed in terms of the presence or absence of violence, rather than in terms of what the violence means and what features of the game shape our responses to it. On the other hand, a focus on meaning rather than effects has helped us identify some pedagogical interventions that can help our students develop the skills and vocabulary needed to think more deeply about the violence they encounter in the culture around them. Through media literacy efforts like OnRampArts' *Tropical America* project, teachers, students, and local artists are working together to envision alternative ways to represent violence in games and, in the process, to critique the limitations of current commercial games. Students are encouraged to think about the media from the inside out, assuming the role of media makers and thinking about their own ethical choices.

Such educational interventions are still few and far between. They are underfunded and underpublicized. They often occur in isolation. One of the goals of the newly launched Education Arcade is to explore the potential educational uses of games. Our focus includes the development of new games specifically designed for classroom use, the development of curricular and teacher training materials to support the use of existing commercial games for pedagogical purposes, the building of shared resources that teachers can draw on to build their own games, the management of an online forum where teachers and designers can share notes, and the effort to consolidate and publicize best practices in the emerging field of games lit-

eracy education. My hope is that this discussion has offered a new framework for thinking about the challenge of game violence and, beyond that, has helped educators realize why game playing can be a meaningful activity.

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