



Video Game Violence. A Philosophical Conversation with Mathieu Triclot

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PJCV: In 1999, The Columbine High School massacre raised the question of whether video games may encourage violent crimes. It is well known that the two perpetrators, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were enthusiastic players of first-person shooting games such as *Doom* or *Wolfenstein 3D*. Some psychiatrists and scholars contended that there was a causal relation between this gaming habit and the mass shooting. Can some video games be criminogenic? What are your thoughts on this matter?

Mathieu Triclot: It is worth mentioning Dave Grossman’s book *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*¹ which was published the same year as the school shooting at Columbine. Grossman’s book is emblematic to the extent that it clearly defends a causalist view regarding the relation between video games and violent crimes. After having reviewed the scientific literature on the subject matter (and not without favouring his own theory that violent video games were, at least partially, responsible for the massacre), Grossman states: “Yes, doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists really mentioned the word ‘causal.’”. Grossman’s core argument rests on the hypothesis of a desensitization mechanism. In other words, he contends that video-gaming accustoms players to enacting violence and murder, and that it gradually destroys the boundaries between virtual and actual action in children.

But this desensitization-theory does not prevent Grossman from noticing other risk factors such as poverty, depression, gang affiliation, alcoholism, and so on. According to Grossman, further factors, such as a stable family, appetite for reading, affiliation to a church, etc.,

¹ Dave Grossman & Gloria Degaetano, *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie & Video Game Violence* (New York: Harmony, 2014).

are negatively correlated to violence. From the point of view of social sciences, what seems problematic in this argument is its way of dividing specific contexts and situations into different factors that are independent from each other. Consequently, video games are, like the availability of firearms, introduced as a risk factor. It is even more problematic insofar that playing video games is close to being universal in the population of adolescents that concern Grossman.

Concerning the argument according to which acting out with violence is fostered by a desensitization mechanism in video-gaming, I especially regard it as reminiscent of immemorial issues about the effects induced by works of fiction. According to Grossman, the technological sophistication of video games tends to erase the boundary between fiction and reality. His stance is reminiscent of Plato's concerns regarding works of fiction and their contagious effects. In contrast, another school of thought – more directly related to Aristotle – insists on the permanence of the boundaries between fact and fiction. From this latter perspective, the interplay between believing and not believing [in the reality of the facts represented] is pivotal in fiction. Still today, the question of the effects induced by works of fiction gives rise to studies with conflicting results. As shown by Françoise Lavocat², this is especially the case for contemporary studies in cognitive science

PJCV: Indeed, the debate you mention is an immemorial one. Before the rise of video games, novels and movies have often been accused of promoting violence or, at least, to be a threat to moral order. However, it seems that video games pose different issues. Contrary to readers or film viewers, players are actively involved in video games. While movies show scenes of violence that are passively watched by the audience, some video games request players to commit crime. What are your thoughts concerning the high-level engagement of players in violent video games? For, from this angle, shooting at random people with one's gamepad in *Grand Theft Auto* seems to be more problematic than reading Sartre's short story *Erostratus*...

M.T: The level of engagement of gamers raises difficult questions. The assumption that interactivity implies a high degree of adhesion of the player to what is represented on the screen is widespread in video game culture, in political and social discourse about video games, as well as in the contemporary vocabulary pertaining to immersion. According to an influential theoretical framework, there is a graduated scale of art and media technologies according to their level of immersion. In a nutshell, the main assumption is as follows; the more interaction and perception are engaged, the more individuals' beliefs about what is represented are strong. Hence, cinematography, for instance, would be more immersive than photography, but less than video games in which moving pictures are supplemented by interactivity. In this sense, virtual reality, through generating a nearly automatic adherence of beliefs to what is perceived, would be the ultimate form of technologies of vision. But these theories have been criticized for sound reasons by other specialists in media studies. In particular, the theories of the spectator in cinema studies (e.g., Christian Metz's works³) directly come to my mind. I do not have enough time to address these alternative theories in detail. However, their main commonality is that they do not regard art and media technologies through the lens of a graduated scale of immersion. They rather aim to identify distinct mechanisms of engagement which are characteristic of specific art media.

² Françoise Lavocat, *Fait et fiction. Pour une frontière* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2016); Françoise Lavocat, « Crossing the borders of fiction. Do non-existent objects have bodies? », *Neobolicon* 40, n° 2 (1 décembre 2013): 431-48, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-013-0202-0>.

³ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trad. par Michael Taylor, Univ of Chicago edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

Going back to video games, it seems to me that while, on the one hand, gamers' engagement with fiction may be more intense in some respects (especially due to first person action and interactivity), on the other hand, the level of engagement may be lowered by further features of the medium. Interactivity does not necessarily amount to an immediate adherence of beliefs to what is perceived. Interactivity may also contribute to put some distance between the player and the characters and stories on the screen. Conversely, the adhesion of movie viewers to fiction (i.e., story, characters, scenes) can be more powerful due to their passivity. Interactivity requests players to use the gameplay and to engage themselves in the action of the game. This feature of video games tends to impede forms of empathetic identification that are pivotal in more traditional art media (and that usually strengthens the adhesion of readers or viewers to fiction). There is a great deal of literature concerning the relation between players and their video game avatars.⁴ Studies show that the avatar can stand for various kinds of "embodiments"; some gamers may regard the video game character as their double, others may see it as a "virtual puppet" that can be controlled remotely, still others consider the character as a functional vehicle of action that they can "inhabit."

In this respect, when they obey the request "to kill," players may have very different ways to engage with the video game. There is no doubt that some video games cultivate a toxic relation to violence by encouraging players to discharge their most aggressive drives. This applies to the single player campaigns in the first-person shooter video game franchise *Call of Duty* in which gamers must destroy large groups of enemies appearing on the screen in the most mechanical way. However, in a lot of video games (and especially in multiplayer modes), the shot functionality is limited to the basic mechanism which consists into lining up two moving objects (i.e., the viewfinder and the target) in a split second. In this context, video game characters will often be reduced to untextured polygons rather than being represented in their most realistic features. These modes of representation lay strong emphasis on the player's skills and help him to follow the action of the game. We can see here that the fictional setting is an obstacle to the playful aims of the video game. Hence, players do not always directly engage with the fictional setting of the game. In addition, further video games are questioning the unleashing of violence and can even encourage the player to question his own actions as well as the world that surrounds him. But this is a different topic. Our starting point was video games taken as a medium whose properties allegedly imply a maximal level of engagement from players. Now we are talking about the medium's cultural contents and their respective qualities. And, at this point, things are not that different compared to literature. For it goes without saying that not every novel is as compelling and thought provoking as Sartre's writings...

PJCV: In your book *Philosophy of Video Games*, you explain that the violence shown on the screen sometimes implies constraints that players must impose on themselves. This is especially the case with arcade games which often show more violent scenes than in other video games. In these games, victory is hard to achieve. You take the example of the video game franchise *Mortal Kombat* in which players can gruesomely kill their virtual opponent ("fatalities," as they are called in the video game culture)

⁴ See for instance Casey Hart, "Getting Into the Game: An Examination of Player Personality Projection in Videogame Avatars," *Game Studies* 17/2 (2017), <http://gamestudies.org/1702/articles/hart> (accessed February 27, 2018) ; Dongdong Li, Albert Kien Liao & Angeline Khoo, "Player-Avatar Identification in video gaming: Concept and measurement," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29/1 (2013): 257-263 ; Narnia Worth, *Players and Avatars: The Connections between Player Personality, Avatar Personality, and Behavior in Video Games* (Brock University, 2015), <http://dr.library.brocku.ca/handle/10464/6985> (accessed February 27, 2019).

only after having completed a difficult series of technical skills. You write that “On the signified level, that is, on the level of visual representation, there is a scene of unlimited and primary violence. On the level of the signifier, that is, on the level of the game-apparatus, this scene required the player to make the right moves at the right moment through an extraordinary self-discipline. The gore on the screen stands as a visual reward for a job which is foremost a work on oneself in order to follow the constraints of the program.”⁵

M.T: We are dealing here with a realm of experiences that are specific to video games — which, at their basis, are a play with a computer or a machine. Public speeches often lay emphasis on how easily players can be enthralled by video games. But those speeches forget that, for many games, this enthrallment only works through gamers’ harsh self-discipline; it really requires a difficult learning process and an extreme level of concentration. In this respect, the optimisation of every input through *speedrun* [i.e., playing the game with the intention to complete it as fast as possible] is the quintessence of this “hand to hand fight” of the player with the video game’s program.

I am not sure whether this disciplinary dimension of video games can be related to a violence that players inflict on themselves or, to put it in other words, if it is pertaining to players’ acceptance of a kind of “masochistic contract.” In any case, this specific way of being enthralled by the rhythm of the machine, of aiming to complete a perfect loop between gestures and audio-visual feedback, leads us to what I regard as the most powerful effects of video games. Since a few years, I have started to enquire about psychological and corporeal mobilisation in gamers especially compared with the phenomena of hypnosis and trance as described by anthropology of religion or ethno-musicology. I remember that I have been struck by Judith Becker’s studies on the “deep listeners”⁶ who are getting carried away by music. Becker refers to a kind of blocking of subjects’ inner-speech which becomes completely saturated with music. One may wonder if video games lead to an analogous state of body and mind. In *Philosophy of Video Games*, I noticed a state that I chose to call “busyness” [*affairement*] in which the inner speech of the player tends to fit into the mould of the machine’s rhythmic requests. In contrast to Becker’s “deep listeners,” rhythm here is audio-visual rather than exclusively acoustic. That is to say that rhythm is not solely imposed from the outside; rather, it is related to the way the player responds to the requests made by the machine.

PJCV: This brings to our attention some possible commonalities between video games and religious experience. Playing video games could induce an altered state of consciousness. But what about the player’s motivations? Aren’t they related to what Nietzsche referred to as “mechanical activity”? In a nutshell, video games would be an escape hatch from a life full of suffering, a “means of combating depression”⁷ with the help of a “system of hypnotics”⁸ ...

⁵ “Ce qui apparaît au niveau du signifié, de la représentation, comme une débauche de violence primaire, requiert du côté du signifiant, du dispositif du jeu, une discipline extraordinaire pour produire au bon moment les bons enchaînements. Le gore fonctionne ici comme la récompense visuelle d’un travail d’abord impitoyable sur soi pour s’aligner sur le programme.” Mathieu Triclot, *Philosophie des jeux vidéo* (Paris: Zones, 2011).

⁶ Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufman & R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

M.T: I wrote several research papers⁹ about what I called “apparatuses of techno-trance.” Those are a set of artefacts which emerged during the 1960s and were contemporary of the first video games. Like video games, apparatuses of techno-trance use laboratory instruments in a creative way. As these apparatuses originated in the context of the counterculture of the sixties, their aim was often to induce some altered state of consciousness that were supposed to be comparable to the effects induced by psychedelic drugs. When scholars write about the genealogy of contemporary video game techniques, they usually consider the computer, carnival games, pinball machines, amusement arcades, and so on. But they often forget how devices that originated in laboratories and universities had been appropriated by the counterculture of the sixties. There are significant commonalities between the mode of operation of video games and apparatuses of techno-trance. Both techniques use feedback loops in order to change images and sounds according to the reactions of users.

Apparatuses of techno-trance (which include stroboscope, bio-feedback, video frames, LSD art installations, Brion Gysin’s dreamachine etc.) were often used for collective performances with a view to a mystical or religious dimension. By contrast, video games separated these techniques from the religious and collective context of the ritual by introducing them into the domain of individual use and private consumption. I think that new ideas emerge when we relate apparatuses of techno-trance to the genealogy of video games. It especially brings our attention to the materiality of video games taken as body techniques (Marcel Mauss) or techniques of the self (Michel Foucault). At the time when I was working on those topics, I was also reading books and papers written by specialists in ethnomusicology. Many of them wondered; what happened to the phenomenon of trance in our contemporary societies? Is it possible that such an important social and anthropological phenomenon simply disappeared? Perhaps we shall regard video games as small suppliers of ordinary and daily trances. This is exactly what Brion Gysin had in mind when he created his famous stroboscopic flicker apparatus called the Dreamachine.¹⁰ Gysin wanted the Dreamachine to replace television and work as a daily supplier of shared family hallucinations.

PJCV: Former versions of the city-building video game series *SimCity* clearly related working classes to crime issues. When the player was creating industrial zones for factories, he immediately had to build police and fire stations to prevent the rise of violence and delinquency. Some video games seem to disseminate an implicit sociological worldview. Given that this worldview is inherent to the program, it is difficult to see how players could simply ignore it. It seems to me that these observations raise a more general problem; aren’t the player’s relation to the implicit violence of the gameplay and his relation to the violence shown on the screen two different things? And couldn’t this former relation to violence be more devious and dangerous than the latter?

M.T: From a semiotic perspective, video games are rather complex insofar as they pile up different and extremely dense strata of meaning. Video games add interactivity and a system of rules to the richness of meanings in audio-visual language. In contrast to traditional board games, rules are handled by the machine in video games. Hence, we can identify two features. Firstly, the regulation of the game is automated. This changes the problem of cheating. In video games, cheating is rather about using the flaws of the computed regulation than

⁹ M. Triclot, « Cybertrance Devices: Countercultures of the Cybernetic Man-Machine », *Substance*, #147, vol. 47-3, 2018, pp. 70-92. M. Triclot, « Les jeux vidéo comme instruments de techno-transe », *Social Compass*, 63-3, 2016

¹⁰ Brion Gysin, *Dreamachine plans* (London: Temple Press Limited, 1992).

directly transgressing the rules. A second feature is that rules do not have to be explained before the player enters the game. By playing the game, he will gradually learn to understand the rules by himself.

This latter feature implies that players learn to understand the system of rules in different ways than in more traditional games, that is, through testing and habit rather than through reading or listening to an explicit rule statement. This may lead to a form of cognitive opacity. Although the player regards the rules, he may not have a clear knowledge of all of them and may not be able to express them in a way which is clear to himself. I do not imply that board game players always know the rules like the back of their hand. However, it is conspicuous that video games entail a different learning process with respect to rules.

Your remarks pertain to the problem of algorithmic regulation which, according to me, goes well beyond video games. As you know, algorithms are used in various contexts. So, it seems to me that your question is reminiscent of the debates around the ethics of algorithms and the biases of algorithms in general. On the one hand, we must acknowledge that algorithms, although often introduced as supposedly value-free instruments, are not unrelated to the biases of their designers. This is a critique of the instrument's hidden intentions. But, on the other hand, there is the cognitive opacity linked to the computational processes. Even to its designers, the program may work like a black box. This is especially the case when the program relies on machine learning techniques. Also, it is worth reminding that programs often use parts of softwares that were conceived (sometimes years and years ago) by different people. Going back to your example of *SimCity*, I think that we can clearly see the role of biases in algorithmic design and of cognitive opacity here. The biases are what you refer to as the game's implicit sociology which is hidden in the system of rules. Due to cognitive opacity, it may be harder for the player to appropriate the system and, thereby, to use his critical thinking skills. The player does not relate to the system with his deliberation skills. Rather, he is impregnated by the system. But the player's ability to interact with the simulated system makes a good part of the interest of video games. This feature can powerfully and efficiently support critical thinking insofar as, in contrast to television and film, it is up to the player to build the meaning of his own activity.

PJCV: You often state that the meaning of a video game depends on how players interpret it and interact with it. It seems to me that you are implying that there is nothing objective about violence in video games. The pacifist will still reflect on love and peace while playing a first-person shooter game such as *Call of Duty*. A perverse person might still find a way to relate his sadistic and violent fantasies to a peaceful game such as Jenova Chen's *Flower* (whose main purpose was to arouse positive emotions in players). But isn't this an oversimplification of the issue of violence? Do you really think that players merely project their state of mind on the video game whatever the game's story or purpose?

M.T: Like for many other cultural artifacts, the different meanings that we may give to a video game are the result of a contingent *alignment* between three axes: (1) the way in which the artifact is individually received, (2) the object in itself – which is at the same time the medium and the message –, (3) the level of production. Any kind of relations between these three axes are possible. For instance, the message conceived at the level of production can be undermined by the semiotic features of the object and/or by the way in which individuals interpret the artifact. However, each axis entails a certain number of limitations and constraints regarding our interpretations. A text, for example, is not merely neutral from the point of view of those who read it. Its meaning further depends on the stances of those who wrote it. Hence, the fact that agonistic situations and graphic violence are all too often used in video games

raises pressing issues. What Kline, Dyer-Witheford and Peuter famously referred to as “militarized masculinity”¹¹ is symptomatic of a specific *alignment* between the three axes that I just mentioned. For future research, it will be important to find out how this *alignment* has developed in our societies and over time.

In this respect, I agree with you that it would be very unreasonable to contend that violence is merely subjective. The idea that violence in video games would be merely left to the free interpretations of players is simply not true. We must always deal with specific situations, that is, with object-subject combinations in given cultural contexts that influence the ways the relationships between the player and the game are made. It has always been the question of how these “regimes of experience” got stable that interested me the most. The complexity of the relation of the player to the video game goes well beyond merely standing in front of a television or computer screen. This relation supposes the construction of social and technical environments that guide the player’s actions and provide him with support points. Without such a background, the experience of the player would have no meaning at all. According to me, it is from the perspective of these *alignments*, at the level of the empirical richness that makes the stuff of video games, that we must ask the question of how gamers relate to violence.

Interview by Raphaël Verchère.

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¹¹ Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, & Greig de Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003).

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