

Constructive Carnage - Violent Gameplay as Affective Ethical Instruction

Heckner, M.-Niclas

University of Michigan, Department of German

Abstract

Violent video games are under constant attack for their alleged effects on non-virtual social interaction. This paper considers violent gameplay a possible scenario for the proposal and negotiation for a distinct set of ethically instructive strategies. In an analysis of the controversial level “No Russian” from the 2009 Video Game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, I show that by breaking genre conventions, this game takes its players out of the pleasurable experience of virtual shooters and forces them to reflect both on the ethical implications of violence as a means of maintaining public safety on the one hand, and on the fictional status of game violence on the other.

In his 2004 essay “Representation, Enaction, and the Ethics of Simulation,” Simon Penny heavily criticizes an installation by Alexander Brandt. The work consisted of the projection of a naked Asian woman, lying on the floor in a dark corner. The only possible interaction was to stomp on her, which made her recoil in pain. Penny’s assumption: “Here is a case study of the potential of electronic representations to encourage or reinforce behaviors in the real world, in this case racist and/or misogynist behaviors. There was no explanatory text or any other device to encourage a reflexive reading of the work.”¹

¹ Simon Penny, “Representation, Enaction, and the Ethics of Simulation,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*, ed. N. Wadrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 80.

Heavily criticizing the installation for not merely permitting, but forcing the participant to virtually enact the abuse of the female body, his critique can't help but reveal the educational factors of this interaction. Provoked and repulsed by his unwilling assault of the defenseless woman of color, this disturbing action caused him to attack the work of art for not explaining its intention, and because the piece did not allow him any alternative courses of action, or any opportunity to observe different reactions from the projection and thus experience the action as less real. However, whatever its intention might have been, it has led him to experience something with a strong emotional reaction that sounds like a platitude when put into words: violence is bad, sexism is bad, racism is bad.

How can a video game, without any explicitly formulated political commentary, lead the player to gain new, visceral understandings of the destructive nature of violence? Taking the example of "No Russian," a controversial and widely discussed level of the 2009 Activision game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* I will show that this level boasts many strategies that could or do allow the player to come to these insights.

In this level, the player stars as Joseph Allen, a member of elite counter-terrorist group "Task Force 141," with the task of infiltrating a terror group and gaining their leader's trust. Before the mission, he is briefed: "Yesterday, you were a soldier on the front lines. But today front lines are history. Uniforms are relics. The war rages everywhere and there *will* be casualties...You don't wanna know what it's cost already to put you next to him. It will cost you a piece of yourself. It will cost nothing compared to everything you'll save."

This introduces the problematic ethical course that the player is forced to chart - "Sacrifice some, save many," - and ultimately prefigures what the player will witness in this level: the state of exception and its implications on civil rights. This approach isn't nearly as

universally recognized as “violence is bad”. On the contrary, it is a controversial issue when it comes to asking the question whether one should e.g. shoot a passenger aircraft if it seems clear that it would otherwise be used as a terrorist weapon. Many would agree that in this case, the installment of the state of exception,² violence and the resulting suspension of civil/human rights are not quite as bad as not interceding.

In the game, the player follows these rules by assisting the terrorist organization in shooting to death civilians in a Russian airport in order to gain the leader’s trust and thus be able to later keep the group from committing crimes with even more casualties.

So how is this level different from other violent video games? Some of the most common and effective strategies of making a game a pleasurable experience for the player are heavily weakened or even absent. It is frustrating to play and once completed likely to leave the player with a bitter aftertaste, rather than with a feeling of victory. There are several reasons for this unusual reaction.

The first and already adduced strategy is the narrative background, the provision of a storyline that forces the player to act within a set of ethical structures that the player probably already has mixed feelings about, just like Penny already knew that violence was bad before he started stepping on the installation. The motivation to save Princess Toadstool or Zelda, a less problematic aim that is absolute and final in its narrative, is more easily recuperable than the imperative to inflict violence upon innocents in order to gain a criminal’s trust.

Second, a major factor in the enjoyment of violent games is their establishment of the experience of otherness to the enemy. The motivation to kill these antagonists is therefore

² Cf. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985) and Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

triggered by aesthetic or narrative devices. An example for an aesthetic device could be drawn from the game *Left 4 Dead*, in which the targets are disfigured zombies, some of which vomit onto the player. A narrative device is a plotline that represents the target as morally corrupt or evil, such as is the case with the representation of Albert Wesker in *Resident Evil 5*. Alternatively, the game can rely on historical characters that are well established in the public discourse as evil, such as Adolf Hitler in the original 1992 *Wolfenstein 3D* game – an enjoyable opponent because he arguably embodies evil in the cultural memory like no other historic figure. The ‘enemies’ in the airport of “No Russian,” however, are less visible as individuals, but rather a running, panicking mass of people who don’t allow for any aesthetic or moral evaluation, even though some do put their hands up or crawl across the floor once shot. It is only after they have been wounded or killed that the player can take a closer look at them, stepping over the piles of bodies.

Now, in the MW2 case, both aesthetic and narrative devices don’t reward the player for having killed the civilians, but elicit a *lack* of satisfaction in their death or incapacitation. Aesthetically, and this brings us back to the installation, they clearly are violated victims, rather than overcome enemies.

On a narrative level, the player is also prompted to feel compassion, since now objects that individualize the scattered bodies come into the field of vision and create a sense of backstory for the deceased: shooting scattered luggage causes it to explode and send food and individually gendered clothes, such as shirts and tanktops flying across the room. Hence, not only are these civilians unattractive as objects of violence, even though the game demands the player to see them as such, but even retroactively make him or her feel bad about following this narrative logic. This is particularly disturbing if the player chooses

to execute the helpless wounded people sitting on the floor, actively witnessing an individual's face's transition from helpless, confused fear to death.

But not only is this level disturbing, but also frustrating. What is largely absent is an enjoyment of what Alison McMahan describes as 'engagement': "[M]any users appreciate games at a nondiegetic level – at the level of gaining points, devising a winning (or at least a spectacular) strategy, and showing off their prowess to other players during the game and afterward, during replay."³ The part of "No Russian" that deals with the civilian massacre, however, is very easy, and requires no sense of timing or dexterity. The very few police officers that appear on the scene are no match for the firepower of the terrorist unit, and, even on the highest level of difficulty, is it more difficult to be shot by them than to overcome them.

This also deprives the player of the enjoyment of identifying with a character, inhabiting a virtual body that perfectly meets the needs of surviving in an extremely life threatening scenario. Here, the player character not only has the necessary firepower, velocity and strength to be a match for the dangerous space it must navigate, but is far too powerful and strips the scenario of all possible threat. The fantasy of empowerment crucial to the cathexis of a player character can therefore not take place, since this power is superfluous – imagine Duke Nukem fighting *Pac-Man's* Pinky, Inky and Clyde on his terms.

Other components of shooters central to their production of enjoyment, the free exploration of space and the rapid flow of sensations, are also lacking here, since the player is forced to follow the slow path of the terrorist group, rather than rush through the scenario like through many of the other levels. More often than not, this level feels like a

³ Alison McMahan, "Immersion, Engagement, and Presence. A Method for Analyzing 3-D Video Games," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 69.

decelerated version of a rail shooter like Sega's *The House of the Dead* with the difference that it requires the player to tediously navigate the path him- or herself, rather than have the computer take care of this.

Strikingly, once the civilians are left behind, and the terrorist group starts fighting a police force outside of the terminal building, enemies begin to become threatening again. That is, the exploration of and interaction with the game space becomes possible and necessary again, as the player needs to take cover from the arriving forces and dodge their attacks, which – according to the chosen difficulty level – are moderately easy or very demanding for the player. The level thus starts being fun.

A dramatic narrative rupture in the game makes the level then end in another overwhelmingly frustrating moment. “Remember – no Russian,” the name of the level and the final words heard from the terrorist leader before the group commits the airport massacre and defeats the police force on the airfield, start making sense when the end of the level is reached. When the driver of the getaway car applauds the leader (“We’ve sent a strong message with this attack, Makarov,”), he pulls his gun on the player’s representation, shooting him and leaving him to die on the floor, saying “That was no message – *this* is a message. The American thought he could deceive us. When they find that body...all of Russia will cry for war.” The player-character with which the player has identified, and for whose superiors and own sake the player has executed the dirty task of the level’s “kill some, save many” ethics is now dead, and the sense of responsibility for his actions rests even harder on the gamer’s shoulders. Thus, all of this level’s gameplay, a large part of which was less than enjoyable or even entertaining, was more than merely in vain on the narrative level. The avatar, after being too powerful for this level, has by sacrificing all those innocent lives only made things more dangerous for the world. All the player-character’s

perceived power is now reevaluated in the light of having served as a pawn for the terrorist's scheme. The player character's construction as a highly talented and intelligent agent, which has dominated the character's development before this level and served as a source of pleasure for the player connected to its unfolding has now given way to the understanding that this avatar is one of the very few game characters who lose their life as a necessary part of the story line.

Roger Ebert, in his famous critique of the 1978 movie *I Spit on your Grave* revealed his personal feelings at the end of this film and his emotional reaction to its long and explicit rape scene: "Attending it was one of the most depressing experiences of my life...As it was, at the film's end I walked out of the theater quickly, feeling unclean, ashamed and depressed."⁴ Similar to Ebert's characterization of his reaction to *I spit on your Grave*, this level leaves the player with feelings of frustration, possibly shame, and the bizarre sensation that the convention of the indestructible avatar has failed him. Furthermore the player experiences an uneasy uncertainty about which character he or she will be assigned to now. If the player possessed a healthy understanding of violence against civilians as unethical, now he or she has through reenactment of this scenario the emotionally involved certainty that in order to sacrifice few for the sake of many, sacrificing these few remains ethically highly problematic.

Of course, if the player does not object to real life violence against innocents, the educational potential of the game suffers greatly. In a footnote, Penny defends his critique of the art installation against the objection that his outrage underlines the beneficial qualities of the work of art that it wants to attack: "[T]here is always a sector of the

⁴Roger Ebert, "I Spit on Your Grave," July 16, 1980.
<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19800716/REVIEWS/7160301/1023>.

population for whom the work is not ironic, and in such cases it serves to reinforce the values it (ostensibly) works against." However, a work of art that fails to be read by a mainstream audience in the same way as by an extreme case who embraces misogynist violence definitely does not automatically render it "ill-conceived," particularly since this problematic term both brings us into the fishy discourse about artist intentionality and attacks the work's *conception*, rather than its *perception* in the moment in which it reinforces the "value" of misogynist violence. Is Steven Colbert an ill-conceived attack against the GOP, because some Republicans find him reassuring? Is *Borat* ill-conceived satire because some might not be able to see the meta-commentary in his blatant anti-Semitism? Or is *Natural Born Killers*' essentially uncritical, because its violence has found imitators in real life? Certainly not. However, Penny is right in saying that people will only read the work of art in a constructive way, if they already believe what it wants them to physically experience. Therefore, if a player does not possess a basic understanding of the implications of violence against civilians, the disturbing experience of "No Russian" will be lost. However, since the game does not reward the massacre with pleasure, the potential for sadistic enjoyment and therefore destructive reenactment of violent acts should be very low, as they are not likely to impinge upon the player's concepts of compassion and respect for human life. However, a person that already has these rather mainstream ethics should have a hard time not being disturbed by the violent reenactment of the civilian massacre. It could be argued that the constant flow of violent images that video gamers are used to have helped them develop strategies to embrace the fictionality of their play, rather than have it emotionally effect them. However, comments in online gamer forums reveal how disturbed they were by this particular level, so that it could even be argued that this unenjoyable experience helped players to reconsider the horrors of violence and reinforced the

understanding that these non-virtual forms of violent behavior are different from gaming violence (i.e. destructive, not a legitimate source of fun, etc.)

Of course, the game allows these feelings to be relieved easily by moving on to the next level, which brings back exactly these immersive and pleasurable devices that “No Russian” lacked, and the enjoyable second part of the level also takes the player out of the tedious gameplay of the attack against the airport terminal. Yet, identifying the ways in which *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* employs violence as a tool to make a theoretical ethical discourse not only more concrete, but emotionally palpable might allow us to use and advance these strategies.

In summation, on the level of the narrative, the game employs a problematic level-objective. The victims are characterized by a lack of aesthetic and moral otherness, an absence of threat, an aesthetic victimization rather than demonization, and their individualization after their death. On the gameplay level, the easiness of the mission results in a lack of engagement with its progression. The level does not allow any fantasies of power, as survival in this game space is nothing that tests and therefore showcases the player-character’s abilities, and when that avatar dies, the fantasy of its invincibility and superiority to the antagonized turn into its being physically overpowered and revealed to have fallen for the terrorists’ scheme, and having killed masses of innocents along the way. Finally, the usually free and enjoyable exploration of game space is exchanged with a painfully slow following of the terrorists’ trail.

There are some obvious challenges for employing these strategies in games on a larger scale: they all make gameplay less enjoyable, and the game resolves this issue by using them in a short segment that contrasts with the other levels. In order to successfully use the reenactment of violence as an ethically instructive tool on a larger scale, and remain

able to compete on the market, these strategies must thus be further developed to make this kind of play rewarding not only as a way of emotionally involved ethical instruction, but as part of a pleasurable gaming experience. However, the possibility to gain ethically beneficial insights from video games should not contribute to a discourse that seeks to legitimize their existence through their pedagogical advantages. An excessive emphasis on games as learning tools could serve to sanction the false view that games cannot be an art form in their own right, and, as opposed to other media, require further legitimation to exist.

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