Violence in Games: The Purpose

Video games are no stranger to violent content. A consistent link has always been shown

to exist between violence and video games, although the real-life effects of said violence has

been debated, and will be debated for as long as games exist. There is considerably less focus

placed on why violence exists in video games than just pointing out said violence. Searching for

the terms 'violence' and 'video games' in any publicly available internet search engine will offer

a myriad of results discussing physical and psychological effects that playing games debatably

and legitimately have on a wide range of individuals, but far fewer results that actually delve into

the reason that violence is present. The purpose that violence can have within the confines of the

game world is something that often gets overlooked, but is nonetheless worth exploring if any

deeper understanding of video games and their narratives, worlds, and mechanics is to be

gleaned.

Violence, just like in any other form of media, can be used to enhance an experience,

from the perspective of its story, its world, and in the case of video games, the mechanics that the

player(s) will use to interact with the product as a whole. Violence in games *can* have legitimate

and meaningful purpose for their audiences; this violence, however, has a wider range of

application when it comes to video games because of how interactive and multifaceted the

medium is. According to Lu et al.'s article, "Story Immersion of Videogames for Youth Health

Promotion: A Review of Literature" in the *Games for Health Journal*, the academic research of

narratives within games have always been significantly limited, and there continues to be

emerging arguments about how exactly these narratives are defined in relation to video games,

leaving the metaphorical door open to violence affecting players in different ways depending on their suspension of disbelief, personal experience, and affection for characters within the game (200-201). The draw of games that incorporate interactive and suspenseful narratives is often tied to the ability for players make meaningful choices within stories that may offer realistic or impactful options that can use violence or conflict in compelling ways. A SAGE Publications article in *Science Daily* pointed out that narrative elements in video games gives players an overall more immersive experience as well as "supports players in perceiving opportunities for meaningful choices and relationships" ("Violent Video Games").

While narrative in video games is something that is still subject to debate regarding its inclusion in games, the existence of a world and mechanics the player uses to interact with said world is not. Because of the commonality of violence in the mechanisms with which players enact change upon a game's world, violence and video games have "become an inseparable pair of dancers" (Cross). This relationship established between the player's character and the entire game world is well understood among designers, especially in games that involve a particularly large amount of killing or violent action. As modern games feature more compelling and realistically-rendered characters that players can more easily empathize with, stronger "moral disengagement factors" are implemented to remove players from feelings of guilt and compunctions surrounding having to commit violent acts (Harman et al. 311-312). The progression and continued violent content in video games "isn't inherently a problem… [but] is, however, dramatically overdone and saturating our games to the point of foreclosing even the imagination of other possibilities" (Cross).

Undeniably, violence is often used as a form of filler content to convey messages and mechanics to the player. At a basic level, the use of violence in video games, as a PBS Game/Show video quotes prolific game developer Kev Levine, "answers a lot of questions for designers". The decisions that face players in common games are often based upon conflict, and throughout the gamut of age ranges and demographics that play games, violence has, in some fashion, been a part of their experience with video games. "Life and death is one of the most easily accessible metaphors for people of all ages", seen in concepts as simple as the "lives" a person has in games like pinball or *Space Invaders* (Game/Show). Violence is easily enforced by game mechanics that are even ESRB (Entertainment Software Ratings Board) approved for children, and the basic idea of violence is something that is easy to understand.

Violence has a significant link to the media coverage of video games, further bringing examples of excessive or exaggerated violence to the public eye whenever news outlets mention video games. "If you went by the sheer amount of news media, you'd think that killing was the only thing that video games were about", despite the continued debate surrounding the correlation between real-life aggression and crimes to video game play and the countless reincarnations that this debate has taken on over the years (Game/Show). With any form of violence depicted in media, Sauer et al. stresses that "Intuitively, context matters when interpreting media violence" (8). There are a number of intrinsic ties that exist between violence and progression in video games, and while they are not inherently glorifying violence in all cases, this commonly occurs due to the ease and understandability of violence in games that designers and developers rely on because of how classically effective it is (Cross).

While violence has often taken the role of an easy to recieve stand-in for more complex and possibly compelling mechanics, there have been games that have used violence to convey deeper themes and messages. Some games come out that subvert the expectations of traditionally violent media and can use the same violence inherent to their narratives, mechanics, or world to give the player a more complex look at themes or issues that might allow for a more meaningful experience or could offer greater context for events within the game. Amidst increasingly violent forms of media like movies and television/streamed shows, games also follow the trend of increased use of violence. Games that use violence in purposeful ways have always existed alongside games that use violence in common ways, but rarely does examination of "not just game content, but the context in which content is portrayed" get the same public spotlight that pieces of news that condemn the violent "agenda" of games (Sauer et al. 2).

One video game series that has consistently used violence as a means of parodying an obsessive and consumeristic take on popular forms of media, like video games, movies and anime, is Grasshopper Manufacture's *No More Heroes*, as directed by auteur game designer, Goichi Suda. A detailed video analysis entitled "No More Heroes and Gaming as Satire" deconstructs a significant amount of the first game, and briefly touches on the thematic differences and similarities seen in the game's sequel. The main point of analysis comes from the protagonist of the series, Travis Touchdown, a scathing representation of the worst aspects of the game's core audience: a beam-katana (an overt reference to *Star Wars*) wielding, killing-obsessed, immature, and misogynistic "toxic masculinity figure who obsesses over fictional media, anime, wrestling, collects merchandise, is a chronic porn addict… whose life *is* is hobby" (Ghastlycrate). The first game uses its mechanics and world to reinforce its narrative

by encouraging the player to grind out money through trivial, task-based minigames and repetitive combat encounters in a mostly empty and dull overworld in order to pay for the opportunity to take on a member of an elite organization of assassins, with the intent on claiming the top rank. The obsession that Travis has with fighting and killing his way to victory (and by extension, the obsession cultivated in the player to get to the next level) is used to criticize the commonly imposed construct of satiating a need for entertainment by utilizing senseless violence and what it means to "play a video game", especially when "look[ing] at the structure of the game itself, it's a surreal balancing act… depict[ing] the joy of escapism juxtaposed with the mundanity of necessity" (Ghastlycrate).

The sequel, *No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle*, attempts to redeem Travis by allowing his character to realize that his idealized fantasy of killing and climbing up the ranks of what turns out to be a fictional organization of assassins made solely to sap money from him is not only absurd, but also forcing him to end the lives of real people, with real meaning to their existences. While this sequel runs the risk of missing the point of its own criticism by "embracing some of the things that *No More Heroes* actively satirizes", the game also tells a different story that attempts to blend together the themes of toxic obsession and the lack of overall meaning to glorified violence when a fight for life, a *desperate struggle*, is a far more visceral and ugly undertaking than what the warped ideals of popular media and the cultures surrounding them would suggest (Ghastlycrate).

A game of fairly recent note that deals with violence in a unique way is Toby Fox's thought-provoking RPG, *Undertale*. Alexandra Müller's extended essay, "Undertale: Violence in Context" goes into great detail regarding "the implications this [game] has for how we speak and

think about violence and (virtual) pacifism in games and game spaces" (iii). Within the context of the game, the player is given clear choices and moral dilemmas surrounding the common mechanic of combat, allowing for monsters that the main character encounters to be spared if certain conditions are met, rather than killed without any heed paid towards the consequences of in-game actions. The goal in developing this game, as stated by Toby Fox himself, was "To make a game that he would personally find entertaining and to explicitly communicate a message against violence to the player" (Müller 9). The game uses multiple endings (routes classified as Pacifist, Neutral, or Genocide based on the player's level of violence), in-depth systems of reaction based on player choices, and considerable feedback on the front of sound design, an aspect that is "of vital importance for the game's emotional impact" to communicate its message to the player (Müller 25). The game creates a world in which the choices the player makes noticeably alter the setting, and even have significant gameplay repercussions, changing the encounters the main character has, and even removing certain mechanics like interacting with NPCs if the player is too violent that would be present otherwise.

A third example of the purposive use of violence comes from "the strange, nihilistic action series" Drakengard, as described by Kat Bailey's *USgamer.net* article, "Unraveling the Strange Appeal of Drakengard". Game director and designer, Yoko Taro is famous for having a starkly unique take on the process of development as well as his opinions within the sphere of game development and the medium as as whole, and this creatively distinct drive is a large part of why the games he is behind are revered as cult classics. Specifically referring to Drakengard 1, the impetus behind the game's design came from Yoko Taro considering killing in games under a more critical lens, "[seeing]... messages like 'You've defeated 100 enemies!.. Hit me that

gloating about killing a hundred people is strange. I mean, you're a serial killer if you killed a

hundred people. It just struck me as insane" (Bailey). The game is set in a highly fantastical

environment inspired by classic tropes of European fantasy, complete with sword-wielding

armies, magic, and creatures like dragons. The main character, Caim, makes a pact with one such

dragon in exchange for his voice, giving the player the access to all the power that a mythical

monster would entail, and simultaneously removing the most obvious link between the

character's thoughts and the player. Caim's single-minded goal in destroying the enemy empire

influences the gameplay and story by constantly forcing the player to repetitively kill more and

more enemies, constantly increasing a death count in the bottom-right corner of the screen,

giving the player a progressively more clear indication that they are "effectively [playing] a

murderer" (Bailey). The true ending of the game is a horrific and morbid apocalypse, befitting a

cast of characters that have really only interacted with the world through killing.

When trying to understand the reasons for the inclusion of so much violence in video

games and gaming media, it is also vital to understand the context of said violence and the

possible purpose that the violence is included for. While there are plenty of examples of games

that simply rely on violence as a form of narrative or mechanical crutch, there also exist games

that turn this trend on its head, offering a deeper purpose of the presence of violence to tell a

more engaging story, build a more immersive world, or allow players to use mechanics in a new

light. As both developers and consumers of media, it is paramount to understand and effectively

utilize the distinction between purposeful and mindless violence in video games.

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