

Towards an Ethics of Video Gaming

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ABSTRACT

Video gaming continues to be an ethically contentious topic, not the least because of its claimed negative effects on individuals and the society they live within. By taking a consequentialist approach to the issue—setting out the consequences of video games and gaming, and assessing those consequences for their ethically relevant properties—video gaming can be given a partial moral defence against its critics.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.1 [Computers and Society]: Public Policy Issues - *ethics*.

General Terms

Human factors, Theory.

Keywords

Video games, ethics, consequentialism, philosophy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Video games have been a target of moral condemnation from very early on in their short history. Often this criticism is linked to the apparent consequences of video gaming, and it frequently seems assumed that if games do have negative consequences then they are morally blameworthy for this reason. This consequential and moral fault is often taken to be a key reason to restrict or otherwise legislate the use of or access to video games. This type of approach can be criticised on at least three fronts. First, we can question whether the attributed consequences are real. While this is mostly an empirical issue, there are a number of theoretical considerations that are raised by the common claims that video games have negative effects on individuals and the society they live within. Second, we can question the assumption that if video games do have these negative consequences, that they are morally blameworthy for this fact. Finally, even if it is shown that video games do have negative effects, and that these do establish the moral culpability of gaming, it can be questioned whether this does in fact settle the issue of the rights or wrongs of playing such games. My discussion of each of the questions is intended to provide an ethical defence of video gaming, though one that is cognisant of the potential moral dangers video games do raise.

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2. VIDEO GAMES AND CONSEQUENTIALISM

The ethical approach I will take in this paper will be basically consequentialist in form. The ethics of video gaming will here be assumed to be settled by first determining the consequences of these games, and then assessing these consequences for their ethically relevant qualities. Of course, as a normative moral principle consequentialism is incomplete as it owes us an explanation of just *what* consequences are ethically relevant. Utilitarianism will serve us pretty well in this case, because it often does seem to be the consequences gaming for the *happiness* or *well-being* of individuals that are germane to their ethical evaluation: indeed, many moral critics have claimed that people are demonstrably worse off in these terms given the existence of video gaming. Other kinds of consequences might be factored into this issue as appropriate, and so I will not prejudge that happiness or well-being are the only consequences that are relevant here. “Well-being,” more widely conceived, can acknowledge the values we have in fostering learning, sociability and social cohesion, good character and personal development, even though these things in themselves may not produce happiness on all occasions. Furthermore, it may be that there are *non-consequential* factors that we should acknowledge in this ethical issue: the obligation to do no harm, and the right to personal freedom being examples. Modern ethics is very much a mixed bag, picking and choosing among principles where those principles are needed to capture and explain our intuitions about a given ethical issue. This cannot be taken as a fault in current ethical thinking, but may be intrinsic to the process of ethics, which after all deals with the rather messy business of human life.

Thus, ethical consequentialism gives us a manner in which to orientate this debate that is at least minimally empirical, and so even if problematic, it has the virtue of grounding an otherwise quite uncertain issue. That is, we determine the consequences of gaming, and then assess the ethical significance of those consequences while factoring in any other non-consequentialist ethical considerations that may seem relevant. The natural question to now ask is just what are the consequences of gaming on which their ethical evaluation might rest? Here we might for the sake of explanation make a distinction between the immediate consequences of gaming—those that arise as the game is played—and the non-immediate consequences—those consequences that follow beyond the playing of the game. We might call the former *internal consequences*, and the latter *external consequences*. This is not to be taken as the claim that such classes can be unequivocally drawn—it is, rather, an expository distinction intended to clarify the issues here.

3. INTERNAL CONSEQUENCES

The internal consequences of a video game are those that arise in connection with—perhaps most strongly during the duration of—video gaming. So what are these internal consequences? There is one type of apparent consequence that we cannot count, even though many critics seem of the opinion that it does contribute to the moral criticism of gaming. The apparent violent, sadistic, and otherwise criminal events that occur within games cannot be factored into the consequentialist account for the very simple reason—though often unacknowledged one—that the worlds and events of video gaming are *fictional*. *Grand Theft Auto*, for example, has repeatedly been condemned for allowing its players to perform acts of theft, assault, murder, and worse. But these apparent actions are fictional ones, and really there are no such things involved in the game. *Grand Theft Auto*, and similar games, might be thought of as *crime simulators*, in that similar to flight simulators, they allow their players to indulge in immediately non-consequential behaviour that pursued in reality can be quite dangerous. The shearing of the behaviour from its normal consequences in fact seems to be a pre-requisite for a player's ability to enjoy it: if what was fictionally occurring in the world of *Grand Theft Auto* was genuinely occurring, the player would not be enjoying it quite so much!

It might be thought that I am arguing against a *straw man* here, but there is an interesting way in which to show that this confusion actually exists. Video games are very often called “violent” or even “ultra violent,” especially in the popular media. Almost all gaming, however, is not in the least bit violent: it is only fictional that there is violence occurring. The violence engaged in is a pretence, or a game of make-believe much like that described by a number of philosophers and scientists in the literature on pretence, fictional works, and fictive appreciation [1]. This is not merely semantic disingenuousness on my part. It is the moral critic of gaming in their use of the term “violent video game” that is being semantically disingenuous. “Violent video game” is an emotive term, but one that rides carelessly over the important fact that fictions do not necessarily replicate the properties that they make fictional: to pretend violence does not demand that the pretender be actually violent, just as to pretend to use a telephone does not demand that one actually use a telephone [2]. And so, the putative violence of a violent video game cannot be assumed to be one of its consequences. It may be that willingly engaging with fictional violence and enjoying doing so has effects external to the games—essentially the charge that Plato makes against tragedy in *The Republic* [3]—but this would then become an external consequence, which I will discuss later.

It is quite a different issue to question whether these fictionally violent, criminal, or immoral states are genuinely immoral: is fictionally performing a crime, and enjoying doing so, not only fictionally immoral, but also genuinely immoral? This is a complex question that I cannot address in full here, though it does seem to depend in part on a different set of internal consequences. While the scenarios depicted in most video games are fictional, and many of a gamer's responses and actions in

regard to those scenarios are fictional [4], it is nevertheless the case that there are genuine facts about what is happening to the gamer. They are, for one thing, imaginatively engaging with what some would find as offensive or objectionable content. What one imagines, and what they feel about it, are not morally neutral things: consider what our moral response is to people who fantasise about acts of cannibalism or pedophilia.

It is not clear in *consequentialist terms* that this would allow us to condemn gaming as immoral however, for the very obvious reason that gamers seem to *enjoy* this content, even if they acknowledge its dubious nature. Such an enjoyment would count not as a negative consequence, but as a positive one. Of course, for the critic of gaming, their tastes are likely to be genuinely offended by such content, and so the experience might count as a negative *for them*. But it would be perverse to blame the game for this reason, especially when such people can easily avoid the game given the classification and ratings legislation that has become more widespread in recent times. Still, one suspects that this observation will not be enough to assuage such critics, and that what really offends them is the idea that *other* people enjoy such content. Incidentally, it is an interesting question, indeed an almost paradoxical one, why gamers enjoy objectionable or *prima facie* unpleasant content such as that derived from violent or horror-filled games [5].

A further range of internal consequences follows from what gamers are *not* doing due to their playing of video games. A common criticism is that time spent playing video games is time not spent being active outdoors, playing with friends, and reading books. Games players are often characterised as passive, insular, and unhealthy. This is reflected most obviously in the stereotype of gamers as socially maladjusted nerds huddled in front of their computers: an image captured quite vividly in a recent episode of *South Park*, where Cartman and his friends are shown morphing into such types as a result of obsessively playing a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) [6]. Thus, even if gaming is not harmful *per se*, if excessive gaming does have such *counterfactual conditional* effects—if gamers had not been playing video games, they might have been reading a good book, interacting with friends, and playing outside—then video games can be morally condemned.

Often this issue is generated by considerations of “gaming addiction,” a topic of continued public interest. I cannot deal with this issue in full here, but I will note that the idea of gaming addiction is not without difficulties. The research into gaming addiction is very preliminary, and this is a very good reason to be more tentative than have some recent media reports in proclaiming that video games are genuinely addictive. Most importantly, the *normative* implications of “addiction” in this context should make us very wary of endorsing the attribution. Some gamers certainly play games excessively, and to the detriment of their physical or social health. But this is not sufficient to establish that these gamers are addicted, because such behaviour also arises as a result of people acting on the basis of their *values*. Artists, academics, and sportspeople are all good examples of individuals who spend their time to the exclusion of other potentially valuable activities. We do not

necessarily label these people as addicted, however, because their dedicated lifestyles allow them to produce things that we hold an independent value for. The temptation to characterise excessive gaming as an addiction arguably betrays a lack of value in the activity of gaming itself: the popular media in particular is not yet comfortable with assigning intrinsic value to games or gaming. I will return to this issue of the apparent normative bias against gaming later in this paper. Still, it is clear that games are often played to the exclusion of other activities, and if this playing is excessive—whether or not it is technically an addiction—this could count as a clear negative in the consequentialist tally.

4. EXTERNAL CONSEQUENCES

In addition to these internal consequences, games can be assessed on what I earlier called their “external consequences.” These are those consequences that games have outside of the immediate sphere of their playing. It is these purported consequences of gaming that often seem the most worrying, and that capture the public consciousness on this issue. In their mildest form, such worries are encapsulated in the concern that parents and educators have about the effects of gaming on childhood aggression or sociability, and these issues have been the topic of a number of recent psychological studies [7]. In their starkest form such putative consequences are illustrated by the frequent claims that video games bear causal responsibility for some recent notorious crimes. It is an often-repeated fact that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold—the perpetrators of the Columbine school massacre—were gamers. The anti-gaming attorney Jack Thompson has brought numerous (unsuccessful) law suits against the games industry, charging the games with responsibility for a number of “copycat” murders. In particular, Thompson filed suit against a number of games companies, citing partial responsibility for the 14 year old Michael Carneal’s 1997 killing of three students at Heath High School in Kentucky.

To distinguish between these two kinds of claim—which instinctively seem of very different credibility—we might make a further expository distinction here between *proximal or limited external consequences*—those following immediately on from episodes of gaming—and *extended consequences*—the attribution of causal responsibility for events, such as the school killings just noted, that are much more distant from gaming episodes. These two classes are not sharply defined, of course, and a number of theorists claim that the extended consequences of games can be attributed to the long term effects of the limited consequences of games. An example would be if an individual’s *desensitisation* to media violence caused by exposure to video gaming had caused a subsequent instance of criminal behaviour.

4.1 Proximal External Consequences

As noted, there is an increasing literature on the consequences of gaming on the immediate behaviour of players subsequent to gaming episodes, and effects on their proximal character, personal development, self-image, or values. Whether or not games have these consequences is an empirical rather than a philosophical issue. A number of the studies already noted do claim a perceived effect, including increased affective arousal,

increased behavioural aggression, increased access to aggressive thoughts, and increased delinquency [7].

Such studies also step beyond this behavioural or physiological evidence, and make theoretical claims about the causes in operation here. For example, Anderson and Dill claim that the documented effects of violent video gaming on aggressive behaviours and thoughts can be explained in terms of video games “priming” subjects to adopt violent behavioural scripts or schemas, and by increasing the player’s affective arousal which in turn reinforces the adoption of these violent behavioural scripts [8]. Furthermore, and capturing a common theme of the literature, “repeated exposure to graphic scenes of violence is likely to be desensitizing,” potentially having long term effects, meaning that “long term video game players can become more aggressive in outlook, perceptual biases, attitudes, beliefs, than they were before the repeated exposure or would have become without such exposure” [8].

There is a natural temptation by gamers and those wanting to give a moral defence of gaming to reject this experimental literature out of hand, but they would be doing their cause a disservice by doing so. Even so, the claims of perceived effect are not beyond doubt. Several recent meta-studies suggest the claims of the connection between aggression and violent behaviour and video games may be overstated, and that there is little evidence that video games adversely affect children to a significant degree [9]. At the very least the evidence seems equivocal; at worst it may seem normatively biased. Steven Pinker suggests the latter when he notes that,

Among conservative politicians and liberal health professionals alike it is an article of faith that violence in the media is a major cause of American violent crime. The American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics testified before Congress that over 3,500 studies had investigated the connection and only 18 had failed to find one. Any social scientist can smell fishy numbers here, and the psychologist Jonathan Freedman decided to look for himself. In fact, only *two hundred* studies have looked for a connection between media violence and violent behaviour, and *more than half* have failed to find one. The others found correlations that are small and readily explainable in other ways—for example that violent children seek out violent entertainment, and that children are temporarily aroused (but not permanently affected) by action-packed footage. [10]

There are a number of conceptual issues that threaten to disrupt such empirical claims and the theoretical models that are built on top of them. It is worthwhile addressing some of these problems here very briefly. First, a number of the psychological studies into the consequences of video gaming for violent behaviour or attitudes can be questioned in terms of what sort of evidence they provide: whether it is correlational or causal evidence. Some of the studies of the links between video games

and aggression do seem almost entirely correlational, and admit as much [11].

Second, the extent of these findings and their relevance to the wider issues of violence in society and the ethics of video gaming can be questioned. Mark Griffiths has argued that in as much as studies have shown a link between video games and aggressive behaviour, they have demonstrated only a very short-term link evident in the play of children immediately after episodes of video gaming, and then only in very young children [12]. That the subjects of many of these studies are young children means that when it comes to assessing the ethics of video gaming, such studies can be only be of limited use, because gaming is in a large part an adult activity (and is becoming more so [13]), and it is already accepted by most reasonable gamers and members of the gaming industry that many video games are not suitable for children.

Third, the theoretical mechanisms invoked in the psychological literature are often beset by significant problems. The notion of is “desensitisation” is especially conceptually suspect. “Desensitising” implies that one’s sensitivity to *images* of violence is weakened by repeated exposure to such content, but is it a necessary consequence of this that one’s sensitivity to *acts* of violence is thus attenuated? Jonathan Freedman claims that there is little evidence that exposure to images of violent real events—let alone the *fictional* ones that comprise the vast proportion of video game violence—does desensitise people to violence in the sense of giving them a blasé attitude toward genuine violence [14].

As noted, Anderson and Dill’s account of the theoretical mechanism behind the perceived effects of video game playing on violent thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours, relies on a cognitive model that sees these as the result of the rehearsal of violent cognitive scripts. Unfortunately, in their model Anderson and Dill do not acknowledge a “quarantine” effect that is exhibited in the cognition in involved pretence and fiction. In their theory of pretence, Shaun Nichols and Stephen Stich note that, “the events that occurred in the context of the pretence have only a quite limited effect on the post-pretence cognitive state of the pretender” [15]. This cognitive quarantine is necessary because first, our ability to interpret a given pretence or fictional episode demands that we are able to recognise what is true in the fiction, which will often differ from what we believe to be true of the real world, and second, without an effective cognitive quarantine between pretence and belief, inferential havoc would threaten to take hold in the mind of the pretender. Children sometimes *do* mistake what is fictional for what is real, but most mature fiction appreciators are really quite good at distinguishing the fictional from the real, and so to claim that video games allow their appreciators to rehearse violent or aggressive scripts does not establish that these will lead to the utilisation of these scripts in the real world, *unless* it can also be established that appreciators are systematically prone to confusing fictional worlds for the real world. Furthermore, some putatively “violent” behavioural scripts that are effective in dealing with the challenges set by video games are not applicable to the real world because those behaviours are responses to *gameplay*. Punching the heads off zombies—

technically, *fictionally* doing so—is a behavioural script particular to winning games of *Timesplitters*. Almost all video gamers are aware that as a response to the real world, this is a behavioural script that is utterly inappropriate: not the least for the lack of zombies in the real world! In reading the psychological literature on gaming, one suspects that researchers often have a very crude implicit model of what gaming cognition and practice amounts to.

Nevertheless, it does seem that games do have psychological and behavioural effects on their players: gaming is not thoroughly isolated from the real world. This much should be obvious to gamers themselves from the phenomenology of their games playing. Scary games can leave one afraid; frustrating games can arouse genuine anger, even put you in an aggressive mood that persists beyond the game. Correspondingly, beating a frustrating level after many attempts can lead to genuine elation. To deny these things would be to make the appeal of games much more mysterious, but it is a big step from the emotional enjoyment of a fictional video game to the claim that such games have a formative and negative influence on player psychology.

4.2 Extended External Consequences

The more interesting cases—not to mention the potentially more damning ones—are where video games are blamed for actual crimes or behaviour far-detached from episodes of gaming. Anderson and Dill begin their findings by setting out the now familiar story of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, suggesting the motivating context of their study: perhaps disingenuously, given that they immediately deny that video games can be demonstrated as a cause of the Columbine shootings [16]. Others are not so reticent about making the causal claim: retired army lieutenant colonel Dave Grossman thinks that video games are “training” children to be killers [17]. Jack Thompson has blamed video games for killings in Kentucky, Columbine, and Virginia Tech [18]. If these were genuine effects of video gaming, the moral culpability of those games would seem to be more easily proved.

Such claims are even harder to demonstrate than the proximal consequences dealt with earlier. The blame apportioned to video games for the unfortunate school shootings in particular is extremely tenuous for a number of reasons. First, establishing a causal link is bound to be difficult, because these events are just not well understood. All but the most physiological or instinctual behaviours have an immensely complicated conjunction of conditions as their causal antecedent, and isolating any one of these as a cause of some behaviour is an extraordinarily speculative affair. Of course, many causal relationships are statistical in nature—the causal responsibility of smoking for lung cancer is not disproved by the fact of some smokers not developing cancer—so conceivably the connection between video gaming and violent crime could be demonstrated statistically through a cohort study. Again, there is the problem that such cohort studies principally provide correlational evidence. But even a *causal* finding does not seem to be something that, if it could be demonstrated, would allow us to establish the causal responsibility of video games for *particular*

crimes. The statistically demonstrated causal relationship between smoking and lung cancer does not have a certain bearing on the causal facts of any *particular* case of lung cancer, of course.

Furthermore, even if a causal connection between gaming and a particular shooting could be demonstrated, it is not clear whether this would be sufficient to attribute *moral* responsibility for the event to the video gaming. In this case games would merely be one aspect of a nexus of causal features antecedent to the shooting, and to isolate them as morally responsible ignores the fact that the vast majority of gamers commit no such acts. By any measure, to respond to a video game as a motivation or incitement to perform mass murder is an extraordinarily *idiosyncratic* response to that game. If we take the dozen or so mass shootings commonly attributed to video gaming as actually stemming from them, this set comprises a vanishingly small proportion of gamers. Even if we could somehow prove gaming did contribute to the crimes, the reasonable conclusion would be that such games were causally significant only in the vanishingly small proportion of players predisposed—for whatever reason—to commit such crimes. Surely then the causal responsibility lands with the mental or behavioural predisposition, and not the game. All sorts of diverse stimuli play a causal role in generating unfortunate effects from idiosyncratic personalities, but in such cases we feel no need to attribute to the stimuli moral responsibility for the effect. To take a pertinent example, the shooter in the Virginia Tech killings, Seung-Hui Cho, made numerous references to Jesus and the crucifixion in the video he made in the hours between the shootings [19]. It would be extraordinarily perverse to blame the Bible for the Cho's bizarrely idiosyncratic response to it.

The issues here are summed nicely in the response of the appeals court judge in the Kentucky case: “Carneal’s [the killer] reaction to the games and movies at issue here [...] was simply too idiosyncratic to expect the defendants to have anticipated it [...] We find that it is simply too far a leap from shooting characters on a video screen (an activity undertaken by millions) to shooting people in a classroom (an activity undertaken by a handful, at most) for Carneal’s actions to have been reasonably foreseeable to the manufacturers of the media that Carneal played and viewed” [20].

The prevalence of these shooting tragedies is of course worrying, and we do have an interest in understanding their causes so as to avoid them in future. It would be fortunate if gaming could be proved to be the cause of these events, as it is the type of thing that could be somewhat effectively controlled through classification or censorship legislation. Unfortunately, it seems that the real reasons for these events are not so easily legislated against or even identified. Most worryingly, there may even be no prospect of discovering a *generalised* cause of the shootings other than geographical or media generated localisation. The historical precedent of campus shootings from University of Texas at Austin, to Virginia Tech, that is transmitted through the electronic media has clearly provided a model for behaviour—even though it is debatable just how self-consistent the model of a “school shooter” is—but each of the incidents may have been performed for reasons distinctive to the

particular shooter. To think there is some sort of generalised cause of such events beyond this model may be entirely unwarranted.

In his defence of the mass arts, the philosopher Noël Carroll roundly criticises the idea that we could genuinely pin down the sorts of consequences being attributed to games in this section, suspecting, like Pinker, that normative concerns are foremost here:

Thus, it may be argued that since we don’t know how to calculate the behavioural consequences of mass art for morality, we should refrain from bluffing about our knowledge of the supposed behavioural consequences of mass art and stop trying to invoke knowledge we do not have to justify our moral evaluations of it. [...] Any group that claims to be able to predict the behavioural consequences of, for example, pornography, it might be said, is simply trying to advance its own sensitivities and moral preferences under the guise of a ‘theory.’ [21]

5. POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES

The truth of these consequentialist claims would not be enough by itself to establish the immorality of video gaming. Let us take it as accepted that video games do have some negative consequences. My argument is that *even if* this is the case, it is not sufficient to establish that video games are morally condemnable. The principle here, of course, is that consequentialist approaches must factor in the positive consequences of video gaming. This is something that is hardly ever acknowledged by the critics of gaming. Indeed, the tone of many criticisms seems based on a view that video games have no redeeming value: think in particular of Thompson’s frequent characterisation of video gaming as “mental masturbation.”

Video games may be shown to have links to aggressive and anti-social behaviour, however there are many other forms of behaviour or technological artefacts that have demonstrable links to such behaviour, and yet these are not condemned as wholly wicked because there is also traditional value held in them. Sports would be the best example. It is clearly the case that there is a link between the playing of sports and aggressive tendencies and behaviours external to sports. Though there is criticism of sport in this regard, it has nothing like the panicked moral overtones evident in the case against video games. Indeed the link between sports and violence—not only in their playing, but also in the watching of sports—seems in many cases far clearer than that between media and violence. Football hooliganism is common in many societies; riots at movie theatres or games arcades are not! The influence of sport on the aggressive tendencies of people is somewhat mitigated by the benefits that are gained in health and fitness, and also in the valuable social activities that surround the playing and watching of sport. Only those with an ideologically extreme bent would think of finding sport morally condemnable because of the link it bears to violent and aggressive behaviour in a minority of participators and spectators.

A survey of the potential positives of video gaming is thus important to provide balance to the rather negative picture of the ostensible consequences introduced in the previous parts of this paper. Again, whether or not video games do have these positive consequences is not something that a philosopher can establish (apart perhaps, from clarifying what it is that is “positive” about a positive consequence): it is instead an empirical issue.

There is an incredibly obvious and significant source of positive utility in gaming: the fun to be had by gaming. Gaming is now among the most popular of the popular arts, and this widespread appeal must count as evidence of the pleasure gaming affords to a large number of people. Indeed, the very obvious pleasure that gamers take in games seems to some to be part of the moral problem of video gaming. Given the choice between a video game and a book, many young people—if not most—would opt for the game. Some see games as a superficial pursuit—as engendering a *base pleasure* perhaps—and so would discount this obvious pleasure to some extent. This comes close to begging the question of the value of gaming: lacking an argument to motivate the distinction between *base* and *refined* pleasures, moral critics of video gaming will not be able to discount this important source of utility [22]. Even if the distinction can be made, it is not clear that this would be sufficient to count against games, for the very reason that games are becoming extraordinarily sophisticated and refined, with a strong aspect of connoisseurship now existing in gaming culture. At least one writer has made a compelling defence of video gaming as constituting a new form of art [23].

This observation leads naturally to the next issue: video games are increasingly aesthetically significant, in many cases constituting artistic achievements to rival those in traditional artistic media. Some of the games I have played have not only been fun experiences, but have been aesthetically satisfying ones. The Playstation 3 game, *Resistance: Fall of Man*, for example, provides an aesthetically compelling and darkly rendered glimpse into an alternative reality. Graphically and stylistically the game is just one example of how digital artists have explored the new realm of artistic potential made possible by the invention of the video game. It also seems that video gaming has given rise to *novel* artistic forms: gameplay design in particular provides a new arena in which video game artists can design inventive and interesting artefacts. The rise of a new art form is surely a positive to go on the consequentialist ledger in favour of gaming.

There is also evidence that video games are beneficial in terms of learning and literacy. An early assessment on the negative and positive effects of video games on childhood development by Patricia Greenfield concludes that the instrumental value in video games somewhat balances their apparent negative impact [24]. Of particular importance, thinks Greenfield, is the necessity of induction in discerning the patterns and rules involved in gameplay, the tracking of the interaction of multiple variables, and the development of spatial skills. James Paul Gee has also written about the potential positives of gaming in similar regards [25].

I noted earlier that video games are often blamed for their effects on player sociability. This claim depends on the assumption that gaming is necessarily an introverted or solitary affair, however. In fact, gaming can be a very social practice in a number of respects, some of them quite novel. It can be argued that gaming has the potential to make people more social, both by making social opportunities more available, and by extending one’s social circle beyond the traditional confines of the geographically local community. There are a number of ways in which games are a social pursuit, or do increase a player’s access to sociability. Multiplayer games, such as *Counter-Strike*, are intrinsically social affairs, indeed, they can be a good excuse to get together with friends and enjoy their company. MMORPGs such as *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft* are also obviously social affairs, and give people access to a larger social circle than they would otherwise have. It is an interesting fact about life in the age of the Internet that many of our social circles extend beyond the geographical barriers in which they were contained up until very recently. Some might complain that in reality these are only “virtual” relationships, but it is clear that online relationships can and do expand into real world meetings. The potential expansion of one’s social circle, especially when we think that life in modern big cities can be solitary and alienating, is surely a positive consequence partly attributable to modern gaming.

6. THE FREEDOM TO DO WRONG

Finally, even if turns out that when we tally these consequences up—no one said this would be easy!—and games and gaming do turn out to have generally negative effects, and so to be unethical, the question of how they are dealt with is still an open one. An assessment of the consequentialist ethics of gaming only goes part way to determining our proper ethical response to gaming. In cases where there is no apparent gain in allowing a dangerous or risky activity to exist in an unregulated fashion, that aspect will often be allowed in the name of *freedom*. Even if a given activity is found to have clear negative consequences, that behaviour can be ethically validated in that its restriction would count as unjust coercion. It is clear that the consequences for the society as a whole of some forms of potentially unethical behaviour are not always significant enough to legitimise legislation. This issue arises in the case of adultery: though commonly held to be immoral, adultery is increasingly not subject to prohibitive legislation in Western countries. A common argument against the legal prohibition against adultery is that it infringes on personal rights to perform voluntary and private acts. Correspondingly, legal systems with strong laws against adultery strike many as unjustly coercive. Similar arguments could be provided in the case of video gaming.

These considerations of freedom may mitigate some of the *internal* or *external proximal consequences* of gaming: those that are relatively inconsequential in the long run. Considerations of personal freedom, of course, are not likely to provide us with clear guidance when there is evidence of consequences beyond the playing of the game, and that have an impact on non-gamers. If games were shown to be causing the *disastrous* effects sometimes attributed to them, and discussed in

an earlier part of this paper, then it is not so clear they would be morally defensible in terms of considerations of personal freedom. Also, considerations of freedom are only likely to validate gaming when it is freely chosen by an informed adult: in principle here we have a reason why children's access to gaming can legitimately be legislated, because they are not able to recognise and to consent to the putative consequential and ethical risks of gaming.

Note what is happening with these considerations of freedom though: they do not show that video games are not unethical, rather, they establish that people should be free to pursue potentially immoral pursuits despite that potential immorality, because it is offset by considerations of personal liberty. In this paper the consequentialist issues have taken as their target gaming itself: I have asked if on balance gaming is or is not a good thing. Another way to forward the debate is to take gaming legislation as the target of explanation, and to ask whether on balance legislating or censoring games would produce more or less desirable consequences. If freedom is factored into the consequences—as I acknowledged at the beginning of this paper, happiness and well-being cannot be taken to exhaust the effects we find valuable—or if freedom is taken to be a factor that sometimes overrides consequentialist considerations, as *deontological* ethical theories suggest, then a clear case can be made for not legislating for games censorship, at least as far as informed and mature adult gamers are concerned. The right to personal freedom is in many legislative matters accepted as a trump card.

7. CONCLUSION

On a consequentialist basis, the ethics of video games and gaming seems to rely on a number of key issues. First, assuming we take a consequentialist approach to the topic, what are the genuine consequences of video games? This in fact is only a very small part of the issue, even though it tends to dominate the popular and academic concern with video game morality. Second, does the presence of negative consequences exhaust the issue? Arguably, there are a range of positive consequences of gaming that offset their potential negative effects. Finally, even if games are found to be unethical through the appraisal of their consequences, this leaves open the nature of our response to them, including our legislative response. If the harm caused by games is relatively limited—which in a large part will be settled by the former consequentialist part of this issue—then people should arguably be free to play those games.

8. REFERENCES

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