Video Games: Enablers of Violence and Stereotypes?

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Introduction

The impact of traditional media, such as dramas, news, movies, etc., on people and society has been discussed quite often as people get drawn to the glitz and glamour of media and accept the information it disseminates as accurate and real. However, the influence of video games, particularly shooter games, remains a largely ignored aspect. With the advancement of technology, video games have undergone significant changes since their inception, evolving from monochromatic lines and shapes to realistic and immersive experiences. This evolution has also brought about the depiction of violence and the reinforcement of stereotypes through the said medium. The Christchurch shooting, for instance, where a gunman targeted two mosques and killed 51 people, is a depiction of how video games can contribute to a culture of hatred and intolerance. During the trial, the perpetrator, Brenton Tarrant, said that "he learned about ethnonationalism from the game *Spyro the Dragon 3* and that the game *Fortnite* taught him to be a killer and to floss on the corpses of his enemies."[1] Given the rising popularity of video games, it is pertinent to be aware of the potential negative effects that video games can have on individuals and society at large. The video game industry is now larger than the movie and music industries combined. According to the PwC's Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2022-26 Report, in 2017, video games only accounted for 6.1% of global spending in the entertainment and media sector.[2] However, it is expected that by 2026, the share of video games will increase to 10.9% and the global gaming industry is predicted to be worth $321 billion.[3] In addition, there are over two billion gamers worldwide, making up 26% of the global population.[4] Despite this massive utilization, the impact of video games on individuals and society is often overlooked. This paper explores the relationship between the evolution of video games and violence, and how they can promote certain narratives, resultantly creating binaries of good vs. bad, civil vs. barbarians, and terrorists vs. freedom fighters, inter alia.

Revolution in Video Games

Over the years the gaming industry has revolutionised dramatically. Video games have evolved from simple shapes and non-human characters to human characters. In addition, there has been a shift from offline to online gaming communities and from mind games to digital war games. In the beginning, popular games were simple with basic plots (players controlled an avatar to complete certain tasks or reach goals in a predetermined order) and seemingly harmless, such as Atari's *Pong (1972)*, a video version of ping pong.[5] In the 1980s, arcade games like *Pac-Man* became popular. However, it was in the 1990s that the face of video games changed dramatically, with the release of games like *Mortal Kombat*, which featured realistic, humanoid characters engaging in violence. Today, such violent games dominate the market. From *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, Valorant, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, and League of Legends to Fortnite, Crossfire*, and *PUBG*[6], globally, all the top downloaded/played games are either First-person Shooter (FPS) games or Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games with violent images, themes, and content. These games introduce players to advanced weaponry and involve shooting, fighting, and killing other characters in a realistic or surreal setting and provide a simulated experience of using those weapons. Anders Behring Breivik, Norway's alleged mass shooter, testified that he used video games such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* to train for his shooting spree that killed 77 people in 2012. He also mentioned playing World of *Warcraft* for upto 16 hours a day.[7] This hereby brings forth the potential of these games to promote aggressive behavior among the players. By allowing players to gain firsthand experience with weapons, combat arenas, and killings through the game, these shooter

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games familiarize players with weapons and, in turn, have the potential to instigate violence which could potentially disturb peace and order within a societal setting.

The Impact of Gaming: Exploring the Connection between Video Games and Violence

Playing violent video games may increase people's propensity for violence. According to the studies published in the *American Psychological Association's (APA) Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, violent video games may be more harmful than traditional mediums, i.e., television and movies, because they are interactive, highly engaging, and require the player to take on the role of an aggressor. This combination of factors makes violent video games a particularly potent source of stimulating aggression and violence among players.[8] This research further argues that the impact of violent video games is more pronounced in characteristically aggressive individuals. The research adheres to the General Affective Aggression Model, which predicts that exposure to violent video games may increase aggressive behavior in both the short and the long term by altering players' aggressive personalities.[9] It argues that this influence can be attributed to the fact that in video games, players are rewarded for being violent, which makes them more likely to be influenced by violent video game exposure than other forms of violent media. Moreover, it suggests that the rewards they receive for being violent in the game can lead to increased aggressive behavior in real-life situations.

Likewise, another study from *Psychology of Popular Media* used brain imaging to investigate the effects of violent video games on empathy for pain.[10] The study found that habitual players of violent video games showed a decreased neural response to painful images compared to non-habitual players. Furthermore, non-habitual players also showed a similar decrease in neural response after playing a violent video game, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, for 40 minutes.[11] This suggests that violent video games can lead to a desensitization to violence and also make players more likely to behave violently in real life. In view of the above, it is pertinent to investigate if the gaming environment is pro-social or alternatively a means to glorify and normalize violence by projecting the act of killing as a fun, clean and exciting endeavor. This is particularly concerning when the games are being utilized for the production, propagation, and distribution of stereotypes and identities of good vs. bad, civil vs. barbarians, and terrorists vs. freedom fighters.

Narrative Building: Role of Video Games in Promoting and Reinforcing Stereotypes

Considering some of the games discussed in the introductory section, it appears as if game developers use this medium to reinforce stereotypes and perspectives which are biased toward their own culture, race, ethnicity, or country. In a rather fancy and thrilling manner certain identities are made to appear inherent and the killing of 'certain people' is normalized. For instance, certain games that were released in the 2000s and are still available for download target a particular community. In the game *Ethnic Cleansing (2002)*, players are made part of the Ku Klux Klan to fight and kill black people. Similarly, *The Zog's Nightmare (2006)*, an anti-Semitic game, portrays players as white supremacists and tasks them to kill the Jews. *Muslim Massacre (2008)*, tasks the players to shoot as many browns possible as possible within the allotted time. Likewise, the Global War on Terror (GWoT), a watershed moment in the development and themes of shooting video games, is not without controversy.

The US is the protagonist of war games since the 1950s and has the biggest digital game market.[12] Utilizing this medium, the US released several war games during the GWoT, and, through these, constructed certain stereotypes of Muslims. From *Conflict: Desert Storm, SOCOM: US Navy SEALs, Full Spectrum Warrior, Close Combat: First to Fight, to Battlefield 3, Army of Two, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare,* and *Medal of Honor*, Muslims are portrayed as Arabs, violent, terrorists, untrustworthy, inhumane, uncivilized and anti-West.[13] For instance, in *Full Spectrum Warrior*, the dead bodies of hundreds of civilians belonging to the Zeiki tribe appear in Chapter 5. They were killed by the Taliban (a Muslim group). The *Medal of Honor* represents Taliban combat with ruthless tactics.
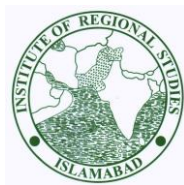
They use the bodies of hostages as human shields. In *Battlefield 3* the enemies are the Iranian Muslim soldiers who are shown committing several atrocities on the civilian population such as an attack on a school and a bank. Similarly, in the *Army of Two*, the major enemy leaders are Muslim terrorists and, in the stage, "Breaking Bagram" of the *Medal of Honor*, players attack a Taliban base and find dangerous weapons, and torture the bodies of civilians. Relatedly, the representation of Muslim women in these games is also stereotypical. They are depicted as weak, oppressed, and submissive.[14] They are often shown as being heavily veiled and submissive to male authority. In some cases, they are shown as being oppressed by their culture and religion and are depicted as needing to be rescued by the game's male protagonist.

These games create virtual dichotomies of the East as deserted, ruined, and ruled by oppressive autocratic rulers aiding terrorists, and the West as democratic, modern, developed, and peaceful.[15] Considering the diverse audience of the above-mentioned war game, each game has a rating of at least 7/1 on game review websites such as *IGN* and *Gamespot*,[16] it is critical to consider that these representations may get internalised in players and they are not fully able to deconstruct those stereotypes. These distorted representations can have a negative impact on players' perceptions of these communities (such as Muslims in the aforementioned instances), creating us vs. them divide and contributing to a culture of discrimination and prejudice.[17] This can lead gamers to embrace these beliefs and become radicalized, increasing the chances of violence against the stereotyped communities[18], as evinced by the Christ Church incident.

Simulated Realities: The Dangers of Video Games Based on Real-Life Events

The highly detailed and realistic simulations in video games allow players to experience a wide range of scenarios and challenges in a virtual environment, giving them a unique perspective on complex systems and processes. It is particularly concerning when video games simulate real-life events and provide an alternate perspective. *Six Days in Fallujah*, for instance, is a game based on actual events. However, it forges the actual destruction and civilian deaths that were caused due to the US invasion and provides an alternative history of what happened on the ground. The owner explicitly said that "the game avoids brutalities at the hands of US forces. Instead, it engenders empathy for the US Marines who fought in the battle."[19] Likewise, the mission 'Highway of Death' in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* is based on a real-life event that occurred during the Gulf War. The Highway of Death refers to a road between Kuwait and Iraq. The American forces heavily bombed the retreating Iraqi forces on this highway during the first Gulf war. However, the aforementioned game relegates the American war crime to Russians.[20]During the mission, Highway of Death, the leader of the rebels, Farah, briefs the CIA officers on the terrain they will use for an ambush and mentions, "If they try to escape to the mountains, there is only one road: the Highway of Death. The Russians bombed it during the invasion, killing the people trying to escape."[21] Whereas, in reality, the attack on the convoy was carried out by American forces, not Russians.

Seemingly, people are more prone to accept movie history over factual historical texts. Metzger and Paxton (2016) suggest that the way historical events and figures are portrayed in video games can have a significant impact on players' understanding of the world and history.[22] To clarify their stance, they refer to the *Disney Effect*, a term used to describe the notion that Disney animation movies can shape people's understanding and perceptions of history. They argue: "It is likely that verbal text, because of its analytical nature and because it is apprehended relatively slowly over time, is more likely to prompt systematic processing. While, images, which are comprehended wholistically and almost instantaneously, tend to promote heuristic processing."[23] Likewise, Ian Bogost argues that video games differ from other forms of media, such as print, radio, television, and movies, in that they are an interactive format that allows players to engage with the content uniquely.[24] This interactivity can have a different impact on players compared to more traditional forms of broadcast media. He suggests that the interactive nature of video games makes them a particularly persuasive medium. He further argues that through the act of playing, video games

can encourage players to create mental models of how systems work and to form judgments about those systems, making them an effective tool for shaping players' thinking and beliefs. This can potentially have negative consequences if players are exposed to violent content as discussed above.
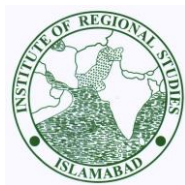
Conclusion

Video games have been a popular form of entertainment for many years, but their popularity has risen even further in recent times. Despite this, the potential impact of video games on individuals and society is often overlooked. This paper discussed the evolution of video games and how they have begun to depict violence and promote stereotypes. The paper also analyzed the impact of this evolution in contributing to a culture of hatred and intolerance. By allowing players to gain firsthand experience with weapons, combat arenas, and killings through the game, these shooter games familiarize their consumers with weapons and, in turn, have the potential to instigate violence among players. This becomes more problematic when this violence is projected against certain communities and races. The Norway and Christchurch shooting incidents serve as tragic examples of the potential negative effects of video games. Hence, it is important to be aware of the potential consequences and to consider the ways in which video games can influence our thinking and beliefs. It is high time to consider What will be the future of a world that thrived in violence, aggression, hate, and prejudices?

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