

A Humean approach to assessing the moral significance of ultra-violent video games

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Abstract. Although the word *empathy* only recently came into existence, eighteenth century philosopher, David Hume, significantly contributed to our current understanding of the term. Hume was among the first to suggest that an empathic mechanism is the central means by which we make ethical judgments and glean moral knowledge. In this paper, I explore Hume's moral sentimentalism, and I argue that his conception of empathy provides a surprisingly apposite framework for interpreting and addressing a current issue in practical ethics: the moral significance of ultra-violent video games. Ultimately, I attempt to show that a Humean account of morality uniquely explains the dangers of ultra-violent video gaming by elucidating a direct connection between playing such games and moral harm.

Key words: children, empathy, ethics, Hume, morality, sentimentalism, video games, violence, wrong

Introduction

Virtual freedom is a hallmark of console and computer gaming technology. Accelerated graphics and new, motion-sensitive controllers facilitate gaming experiences that are more dynamic, interactive, and realistic. Gamers relish the opportunities to flex their imaginations in rich, life-like environments. In these virtual worlds, players can do many things that, in real life, would be impossible. Sometimes, however, they do things that would be simply *unthinkable*. Certain video games enable their characters to engage in murder, torture, rape, or pedophilia. While these virtual practices doubtless evoke shock and repugnance in some individuals, others insist that playing video games is a benign and largely amoral activity.

In even the most violent games, no actual creature is ever physically harmed. Sequences in which characters appear to bludgeon their opponents to death amid screams of agony are reducible to the synchronization of stylized polygon movement and triggered audio files. These facts have confounded legislators, aestheticians, parents, and concerned citizens who struggle to answer the question: Is it wrong to play violent video games? Recently, ethicists have attempted to analyze this issue in terms of

utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics.¹ In my view, however, elements of David Hume's moral sentimentalism provide the most apposite framework for examining the moral significance of violent video games.

In this paper, I explore the ethical relevance of *ultra-violent* video games using a Humean account of morality. First, I discuss several examples of controversial video games. Second, I explore recent theories that purport to show wherein the wrongness of ultra-violent video games lies. Third, I outline Hume's moral theory, specifically focusing on his notion of empathy. Finally, I argue that a Humean conception of empathy may explain the dangers of ultra-violent video gaming by elucidating a *direct* connection between playing such games and moral harm.

A brief history of controversial video games

Violent or otherwise offensive video games are certainly not new. In 1982, Mystique released a pornographic game for the Atari 2600 console system in which the primary objective is to have sex with a

¹ Matt McCormick. Is it wrong to play violent video games? *Ethics and Information Technology*, 2001: 277–287.

bound Native American woman.² While Mystique representatives deny the accusation, many assert that the game depicts rape. Not all game publishers, however, are reluctant to identify their products with rape and violence. In 2005, Illusion released the sequel to their PC title “Battle Raper: Hyperreal Action.”³ More recently, controversy has arisen surrounding a mainstream PC title called “Second Life.” While similar to most popular massively multiplayer online role playing games, “Second Life” is actually a 3D digital world imagined and created by its residents.⁴ This internet-based, cyber community allows virtual characters to interact in various ways. Critics charge that “Second Life” facilitates child pornography. Professor Peter Singer explains, “If your virtual character is an adult, you can have sex with a virtual character who is a child.”⁵ Singer, however, is more concerned about video game *violence*. He states,

“The burst of publicity about virtual pedophilia in Second Life may have focused on the wrong target. Video games are properly subject to legal controls, not when they enable people to do things that, if real, would be crimes, but when there is evidence on the basis of which we can reasonably conclude that they are likely to increase serious crime in the real world. At present, the evidence for that is stronger for games involving violence than it is for virtual realities that permit pedophilia.”⁶

If Singer’s contention is correct, then there is a large and growing problem in the electronic gaming industry. While relatively few video games permit sexual interaction between characters, and fewer still permit deviant sexual conduct, many popular, mainstream titles permit and even *require* copious amounts of wanton, graphic violence. Such games are often referred to as *ultra-violent*. Some state statutes have distinguished ultra-violent video games from other classifications due to vivid, repetitive, and loathsome violence.⁷ Others have defined an ultra-

violent video game as one that “contains any depiction of a serious injury to a human being in a manner that is especially heinous, cruel or atrocious.”⁸

In 1976, an arcade game called “Death Race” was perhaps the first violent video game to spark national controversy in the USA.⁹ Players earned points by using a tiny vehicle to run over stick figures. Despite the game’s primitive black and white graphics, its violent content incited moral panics, television news specials, and what effectively amounted to a ban on the title. Nearly three decades later, a new series featuring vehicular violence began to capture media attention. The Grand Theft Auto (GTA) games are prime examples of ultra-violent games. In “Grand Theft Auto: Vice City,” an injured character may regain health by paying to have sex with a prostitute.¹⁰ A popular strategy among GTA players is to kill the prostitute after sex in order to recover the cost of her services. Players encounter many personalities in the course of their GTA missions. Most are not enemies, but merely represent average citizens walking about the town. Players are free to target these unsuspecting virtual characters as well. One can shoot, bludgeon, stab, and even set fire to any man or woman who happens to cross his path. The last option is particularly grisly, as it results in an innocent character appearing to scream helplessly while writhing in pain for several seconds.

A game that not only enables but requires brutality is SCEA’s “God of War.”¹¹ In this multiplatform game, one act that players *must* complete before advancing involves ‘sacrificing’ a soldier. One player recalls thinking, “You’ve got to be kidding me. They’re not going to make me do that,” but reluctantly, he does what the game demands, and as he pulls a lever, “The torches orient around the cage and fire, scalding the soldier’s body while he screams out in pain inside the cage.”¹² According to this player, his reaction seems to be atypical. Others report feeling apathetic or even excited about causing the soldier’s incineration.

The game “Reservoir Dogs” has been banned in several areas for encouraging and rewarding torturous virtual behavior. The Australian Ratings Board names the following reasons for banning the game:

² William Cassidy. Top Ten Shameful Games. *Gamespy*, 2002, <http://archive.gamespy.com/top10/december02/shame/index4.shtml> (accessed August 10, 2007).

³ Illusion. *Battle Raper: Hyperreal Action*, 2005.

⁴ Linden Research, Inc. *Second Life FAQ*. 2007. <http://secondlife.com/whatis/faq.php> (accessed August 10, 2007).

⁵ Peter Singer. Video Crime Peril vs. Virtual Pedophilia. *The Japan Times Online*. June 22, 2007, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/eo20070722a1.html> (accessed August 10, 2007).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ronald Standler. *State Statutes Regulating Video Games in the USA*. June 2007. <http://www.rbs2.com/ssrvrg.pdf> (accessed August 10, 2007).

⁸ Media Coalition, Inc. *Media Coalition, Inc: Legislative Updates*. 2007. <http://www.mediacoalition.org/legislative/> (accessed August 10, 2007).

⁹ Exidy. *Death Race*, 1976.

¹⁰ Rockstar. *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, 2002.

¹¹ SCEA. *God of War*, 2005.

¹² G. Turner. God of War: Guilt and Penance. *The New Gamer*, 2005. http://thenewgamer.com/content/archives/god_of_war_guilt_and_penance_in_ancient_greece (accessed August 10, 2007).

repeated pistol whipping the side of the head with blood spray evident, burning the eyes of hostages with a cigar until they scream and die, cutting the fingers off a hostage with blood bursts as the victim screams in pain.¹³

Perhaps a redeeming feature of the aforementioned games is that they do have objectives beyond senseless killing and torture. Many, however, deny that “Manhunt” shares this feature. In “Manhunt,” the main character is a death-row inmate who is saved from execution and forced to work for a snuff-film maker. The character can use various weapons, including guns, plastic bags, and hammers to murder his victims.¹⁴ “Manhunt 2” was slated for release on the Playstation 2 and Nintendo Wii systems this year, but ratings boards have banned the sequel in the UK and delayed it in US markets. The British Board of Film Classification denied certification on the grounds that “there is sustained and cumulative casual sadism in the way in which these killings are committed and encouraged, in the game... the game has an unrelenting focus on stalking and brutal slaying and there is a sheer lack of alternative pleasures to offer the gamer.”¹⁵ Some game reviewers had an opportunity to preview the title. They note that the Nintendo Wii’s new, motion-sensitive remote facilitates a unique playing experience for this game. GameSpot staff reviewers report,

“The big hook to the action is the way the controller is used during the various kills. You’ll now have to actively follow onscreen motions that approximate your actions. Throwing a chair? Hold the Wii Remote and analog stick as if you’ve got the chair in your hands and move it accordingly. Stabbing someone? Jab that Wii Remote.”¹⁶

Increased accessibility, along with new technologies like the Wii remote, accelerated graphics, and the promise of future advances in haptic capabilities, have all fueled the recent controversy behind ultra-violent video games.

¹³ B. Sinclair (2006, June 27). *Australian ratings board explains Reservoir Dogs ban*. Retrieved August 10, 2007, from GameSpot Video Games: <http://www.gamespot.com/pc/action/reservoirdogs/news.html>.

¹⁴ Greg Kasavin. *Manhunt*. *Gamespot*, 2003, <http://www.gamespot.com/ps2/action/manhunt/review.html> (accessed August 10, 2007).

¹⁵ Tony Smith. *Manhunt 2 banned*. *Reg Hardware*, 2007, http://www.reghardware.co.uk/2007/06/19/manhunt_2_banned/ (accessed August 10, 2007).

¹⁶ Guy Cocker and Ricardo Torres. *Manhunt 2*. *Gamespot*, 2007, <http://www.gamespot.com/wii/action/manhunt2/news.html> (accessed August 10, 2007).

For many, a relationship between morality and video game play may be difficult to fathom, but some theorists assert that not only does such a connection exist, but that it is a significant and often integral part of electronic gaming. Dr. Miguel Sicart explains that computer game players are moral beings who help to construct the ethical meaning of their virtual experiences from within a set of rules that project a fictional world.¹⁷ Also, according to Sicart, the choices a player makes within a game are subject to evaluation by individual values, player community standards, and cultural norms. In these ways, electronic gaming is an ostensibly ethical phenomenon. The question remains, however, as to how one might assess the moral significance of video games, and particularly, ultra-violent games, which are often regarded as psychologically and socially corrosive.

Attempts to locate the wrongness in ultra-violent games

In 2001, Professor Matt McCormick imparted, “Humanity is now facing a new set of moral questions brought on by developments in technology.”¹⁸ He joins a small, but growing number of ethicists who have addressed the moral significance of violent video games. One of McCormick’s most striking conclusions is that no successful argument against playing violent video games can appeal to the premise that simulating immoral acts increases the likelihood that one will harm others.¹⁹ On his view, we condone other high-risk activities (like football, rock climbing, and so forth) with proven harmful effects, and for the most part, theorists merely speculate about the harms of violent video gaming. He cautions that to condemn the latter and not the former would be inconsistent. McCormick’s claim is an interesting one given that many do, in fact, appeal to the very thesis that he rejects.

Peter Singer cites a recent meta-analysis of violent video game effects and argues that there is strong evidence for a causal connection between playing such games and committing violent acts in the real world. He warns, “The risks are great and outweigh whatever benefits violent video games may have. The evidence may not be conclusive, but it is too strong to be ignored any longer.”²⁰ Singer also notes that some

¹⁷ Miguel Sicart. *Game, Player, Ethics: A Virtue Ethics Approach to Computer Games*. *International Review of Information Ethics*, 2005: 14–18.

¹⁸ Matt McCormick. *Is it wrong to play violent video games?* *Ethics and Information Technology*, 2001: 277–287.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 278.

²⁰ Singer, 2007.

video games have been implicated as relevant factors in juvenile crimes. He mentions, for instance, that “Doom,” a first-person shooter game, was a favorite of Columbine High School killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. There are plenty of other cases in which video games were blamed for teenage murder. In 2006, attorneys referred to “GTA: Vice City” as a murder simulation device and filed a suit against Rockstar Games, alleging that fourteen year-old Cody Posey gunned down his family largely because of the game.²¹ In February 2004, a seventeen year-old who frequently played “Manhunt” stabbed and beat another child to death with a knife and claw hammer. The victim’s parents partially blamed the murder on the game, adducing the similarities between methods of the perpetrator and the killing techniques used in “Manhunt.”²²

Incidents in which video game players commit violent acts are no doubt tragic, but appealing to such cases as evidence for the legal or moral culpability of violent video games may be problematic. In the first place, millions of children play violent video games, so it is statistically probable that many juvenile offenders will also be players of violent video games strictly as a matter of chance. Second, in most cases which attempt to link violent video games to teenage violence, there are other common threads which appear to be more causally relevant, such as abuse or depression. Finally, one could argue that those few children who were inspired by video games to commit real world violence were mentally disturbed, ticking time bombs. They might have just as easily been set off by a billboard ad, a television commercial, or perhaps even a suggestive arrangement of clouds in the sky. After all, there are many children who play violent video games, and yet, do no harm to others. Some theorists assert that not only is the research linking violent video games to real-world violence inadequate, but that moderate violent video game play could actually be a form of healthy escapism for some youth.²³

Video games may also have educational value. Professor James Paul Gee argues that many video games, including some that are violent, incorporate important learning principles that can be instructive

for school administrators. Gee explains that academic subjects are best construed not merely as fact sets but as “games” in which players, constrained by certain rules, take on roles and attempt to achieve objectives.²⁴ In this way, biology students, for example, would learn more than scientific trivia; they would learn how to *do* biology. A key point for Gee is that successful game designers make a lot of money creating complex, difficult learning experiences that people enthusiastically embrace. He contends that “challenge and learning are a large part of what makes video games motivating and entertaining.”²⁵ Gee holds that by studying the cognitive science principles that video games employ in order to motivate players, educators can learn how to engage students more effectively.

Gordana Dodig-Crnkovic and Thomas Larsson agree that video games are powerful learning tools, perhaps even powerful enough to warrant concern. Dodig-Crnkovic and Larsson suspect that some video games are examples of *persuasive technology* which may be able to affect players’ actions in the real world.²⁶ The theorists posit that violent video games may be especially dangerous. They caution that current research strongly suggests a link between violent video game exposure and aggressive behavior, and they argue that the potentially harmful effects of violent video games must be taken seriously.²⁷

McCormick acknowledges that studies suggest correlations between violent video game exposure and aggressive behavior. He doubts, however, that empirical research will demonstrate that playing violent video games constitutes an overall increased *potential* to do harm that outweighs the actual, known benefits of the activity.²⁸ Some of the benefits that McCormick mentions include the pleasure that gaming affords its players and the technological advances that the demand for innovative games drives. He also mentions that “airlines, police departments, and the military are all using video game technology to train and become proficient at tasks that are too risky to practice otherwise.”²⁹ Yet, one could object to McCormick’s list and argue that

²¹ Tim Surette. GTA blamed in court case... again. *Gamespot*, 2006, <http://www.gamespot.com/ps2/action/grandtheftautovicecity/news.html> (accessed August 10, 2007).

²² Tor Thorsen. Manhunt blamed in UK murder. *Gamespot*, 2004, <http://www.gamespot.com/ps2/action/manhunt/news.html> (accessed August 10, 2007).

²³ Cheryl K Olson. Media Violence Research and Youth Violence Data: Why Do They Conflict? *Academic Psychiatry*, 2004: 144–150.

²⁴ James Paul Gee. Good Video Games and Good Learning. *Academic Advanced Distributed Learning Co-Lab*. 2005. http://www.academiccolab.org/resources/documents/Good_Learning.pdf.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 2005.

²⁶ Gordana Dodig-Crnkovic and Thomas Larsson. Game Ethics – Homo Ludens as a Computer Game Designer and Consumer. *International Review of Information Ethics*, 2005: 20–23.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 21.

²⁸ McCormick, 2001, p. 281.

²⁹ McCormick, 2001, p. 280.

those exact benefits would still exist without violence in mainstream video games. Violent games are not the only ones that are pleasurable or cutting-edge, and one could support the use of violent video games for high-risk industry training purposes, but object to the dissemination of such games into the general public.

McCormick concludes that utilitarian arguments and Kantian theory fail to demonstrate the moral wrongness of violent video games. He states rather that only the Aristotelian virtue ethicist has a ready answer to the question, ‘What is wrong with playing violent video games?’ The answer is that “by participating in simulations of excessive, indulgent, and wrongful acts, we are cultivating the wrong sort of character.”³⁰ This, of course, presumes that there is a ‘right sort of character’ that is incompatible with violent video game play. One could argue that plenty of virtuous people occasionally play violent video games, just as plenty of virtuous thespians simulate wrongful acts in their roles as villains. Furthermore, as Aristotle’s theory is not the only representative of virtue ethics, perhaps other virtue theorists would conclude that playing violent video games is morally praiseworthy. Many, for instance, view Friedrich Nietzsche as a virtue ethicist.³¹ Nietzsche emphasized values like creativity, courage, tenacity, and strength of will. Some would argue that playing violent video games enhances such virtues.

Dr. David Waddington explains the wrongness of ultra-violent video games differently, arguing that such games might be wrong because they cause us to devalue the idea of wrongness itself.³² Waddington suggests that as video games increase in verisimilitude, their technical sophistication will be accompanied by an increased difficulty in distinguishing real transgressions from simulated ones.³³ Of course, at present, most of us can easily tell the difference, but in the future, as we become more immersed in electronic gaming and internet-based environments, the lines between actual and virtual reality may become blurred to an extent that is both frightening and pernicious. On my view, Waddington is on the right track, but while he seems to express a caveat about the possible future consequences of ultra-violent video games, I think the evidence may suggest a real and present moral danger.

In the following section, I argue that David Hume’s moral theory, and his particular conception of empathy, can help to elucidate a direct connection between violent video games and moral harm. This harm consists in the erosion of our empathic faculties; the results of which may not only contribute to the devaluation of wrongness, but also to the dissolution of our abilities to make moral judgments in general.

Hume’s moral philosophy

The moral philosophy of David Hume represents a complex topic that admits of multiple interpretations and focal points. As it would be impossible to give a thorough account of Humean morality within the confines of this paper, I instead concentrate on a subset of views that Hume presents in his *Treatise of Human Nature*. Specifically, I focus on his notion of empathy. A brief overview of his ideas should suffice to illuminate a potential relationship between his views and the moral significance of ultra-violent video games.

Hume is typically regarded as a moral sentimentalist. That is to say he holds that morality is based in human sentiment and that any moral knowledge which human beings might possess does not consist of facts that are discoverable by reason. He writes, “Since vice and virtue are not discoverable merely by reason...it must be by means of some impression or sentiment they occasion, that we are able to mark the difference betwixt them...Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judged of...”³⁴ For Hume, a moral judgment arises from a particular kind of feeling that we experience toward a moral entity. A type of pleasure that Hume labels ‘moral approbation’ signifies virtue, while a kind of pain, termed ‘moral disapprobation’, signifies vice. Thomas Reid and others have criticized this notion of morality, arguing that approbation and disapprobation are not the sorts of things on which moral judgments can be based, since those sentiments themselves are not independent of moral judgment. It seems rather that moral judgments typically precede rather than arise from sentiments of moral approbation or disapprobation.³⁵ Hume’s view is peculiar, as our moral judgments certainly seem to unfold in the manner

³⁰ Ibid, p. 285.

³¹ Brian Leiter. *Nietzsche’s Moral and Political Philosophy*. June 27, 2007. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-moral-political/> (accessed August 10, 2007).

³² David Waddington. Locating the wrongness in ultra-violent video games. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 2007: 121–128.

³³ Ibid, p. 7.

³⁴ David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc, 2005, p. 363.

³⁵ Thomas Reid. Excerpts from *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*. In *British Moralists 1650–1800: Hume to Bentham (book ii)*, by D. D. Raphael, 265–310. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1991, p. 296.

that Reid suggests. When I feel morally indignant toward a person who has stolen from me, I do not think that s/he is wrong because of my resentment toward him or her, but rather I believe myself to feel resentment toward the moral agent because that person has wronged me. Hume could argue that my intuitions here are simply mistaken. Unless one can show that the sentiments that we associate with morally significant conduct automatically entail a previous judgment, then Hume's view seems safe from charges of circularity. Ethicist, Michael Slote, agrees, arguing that Hume takes care to "specify approval and disapproval in terms that don't actually bring in judgment."³⁶

Another criticism of Hume's account is that by reducing morality to mere sentiments, he does violence to the meaning and import of moral judgments. The current, prevailing view is that Hume rejects moral realism.³⁷ That is to say that he rejects the idea that there are absolute moral facts that exist independently of any preferred human perspective. For Hume, however, a rejection of moral realism is not a rejection of morality *per se*. Hume holds that moral judgments are extremely important and authoritative. For instance, he writes,

"Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compared to sounds, colors, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind: And this discovery in morals...has little or no influence on practice. Nothing can be more real, or concern us more, than our own sentiments of pleasure and uneasiness; and if these be favorable to virtue and unfavorable to vice, no more can be requisite to the regulation and conduct of our behavior."³⁸

Hume further asserts that moral judgments are not as instable or fleeting as emotions, because people tend to make moral judgments from a *common point of view*. In order to avoid the effects of personal bias and to prevent what he calls 'continual contradictions,' Hume claims that we "fix on some steady and general points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation."³⁹ Hume also seems to assent to the possibility of normative claims. For example, he argues

that the general opinion of mankind has *perfectly infallible* authority in moral cases (though he allows that individual moral sentiments are correctible), and he also explains how certain obligations, like the obligation to submit to government, directly follows from this authority.⁴⁰

It is clear, then, that Hume regards morality as meaningful and authoritative. While his sentimentalism may undermine some notions of vice and virtue, it is compatible with many others. Slote, for example, is developing a 'sentimental realism' that is partly based on Hume's moral theory.⁴¹

Hence, I would argue that rather than jeopardizing the import of morality, Hume's ideas merely provide thinkers with another way of interpreting a very significant phenomenon.

Thus far, I have attempted to show that despite his apparent moral irrealism, Hume places a great deal of import on moral judgments. It has been established that, for Hume, sentiments of approbation and disapprobation ground such judgments. It seems incumbent upon him, then, to give an account of how these sentiments arise. I argue that Hume does provide his readers with such an account. He refers to a principle that he names 'sympathy' as the mechanism by which we make moral judgments. He writes, "We are certain that sympathy is a very powerful principle in human nature... we shall not doubt that sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions."⁴² It seems fairly clear that though the term was not yet invented, Hume means by 'sympathy' what today we call 'empathy'.⁴³ For instance, he writes, "No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments."⁴⁴ He elsewhere reiterates the idea that sympathy is a means by which we *enter into* the sentiments of others. I shall henceforth take it for granted that the principle that Hume refers to as sympathy, is by our current meaning, actually *empathy*.

Empathy plays a vital role in Hume's moral theory. He explains,

"Our affections depend more on ourselves, and the internal operations of the mind, than any other impressions; for which reason they arise more naturally from the imagination and from every

³⁶ Michael Slote. *Moral Sentimentalism. Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 2004: 3–13, p. 4.

³⁷ There are some, however, like David Fate Norton, who make the case that Hume is a moral realist. David F. Norton. "Hume's Moral Ontology." *Hume Studies*, 1984: 189–214.

³⁸ Hume, 2005, p. 362.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

⁴¹ Slote, 2004, p. 3.

⁴² Hume, 2005, p. 469.

⁴³ Slote notes that the term, empathy, and the German word upon which it's based – *Einfuehlung*, didn't exist until the twentieth century (2004, p. 5).

⁴⁴ Hume, 2005, p. 244.

lively idea we have of them. This is the nature and cause of sympathy; and 'tis after this manner we enter so deep into the affections and opinions of others whenever we discover them."⁴⁵

It seems when we encounter some morally significant character or situation, the relevant ideas and/or sentiments impress upon our minds. By imagination, we are able to consider those ideas or sentiments from a common point of view, and in a sense, to actually experience the other's emotions. The resulting approbation or disapprobation gives rise to a moral judgment. We also have the abilities to merely reflect on some sentiment or character and to judge (feel) its moral quality, according to its propensity to benefit or harm others. Empathy with public interest enables this process and produces our moral sentiments in justice and many other virtues.⁴⁶

Current research suggests that Hume anticipated at least three significant discoveries in human psychology: (1) empathy plays a central role in making moral judgments, (2) empathy depends upon some degree of resemblance between empathizers and those with whom they empathize, and (3) empathy is a largely universal human faculty. Martin Hoffman's pioneering work on empathy and moral development strongly supports points (1) and (2), while (3) is evidenced by recent brain research, which suggests that empathy is based in human biology and evolution.

Martin Hoffman is a psychologist who has been investigating moral development for decades. His research has led him to conclude that "...most moral dilemmas in life arouse empathy because they involve victims, seen or unseen, present or future. Empathy activates moral principles and, either directly or through these principles, influences moral judgment and reasoning."⁴⁷ Hoffman observes that empathy plays an integral role in developing orientations toward caring and justice, both of which are central to most ethical systems. He also shows that stronger senses of empathy tend to motivate pro-social behaviors. One study revealed that individuals with higher empathy demonstrate a desire to assist or replace peers who are engaged in distressing activities, while those with lower empathy prefer to watch their suffering peers or simply to depart from the uncomfortable setting.⁴⁸ Another interesting finding is that even infants are capable of empathic responses. Newborns display a unique, reactive cry to other

infant cries. Hoffman explains, "The most likely explanation is that the newborn reactive cry is an innate, isomorphic response to the cry of another being of the same species, which survived natural selection and is adaptive."⁴⁹ The idea that empathy is an evolved, biological feature of human beings is further evidenced by recent brain research.

James Harris cites multiple studies which identify neurobiological correlates to empathy in humans, and suggest similar empathic relationships in non-human primates.⁵⁰ These studies lend support to the notion that empathy has neurobiological, evolutionary foundations. Other discoveries, such as the identification of 'mirror neurons' in macaque monkeys, further evidence this idea. Mirror neurons are brain cells that respond equally when we perform an action and when we witness someone else perform the same action, and researchers suggest that these neurons could explain how we empathize with others.⁵¹ These findings conform to Hume's assumptions that empathy is universal and largely dependent upon resemblance between empathizers and those with whom they empathize.⁵² What Hume did not seem to anticipate is the fact that the development of empathy can be aided or hindered by environmental influences.

Hoffman warns that one's empathic faculty may be limited by a tendency to over-empathize with those like one's self and to under-empathize with those who are different.⁵³

This may explain why empathy does not always ensure virtuous behavior. In addition to these natural limitations, Hoffman also indicates that empathy can be damaged or perhaps even destroyed by experiences such as power-assertive childrearing.⁵⁴ Some research suggests that playing ultra-violent video games also harms the empathic faculty.

Empathy and violent video games: the implications

It is suspected that playing violent video games is inimical to empathic function. For instance, at least one study suggests that playing violent video games causes deactivations in limbic orbitofrontal areas of

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 247.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 439.

⁴⁷ Martin Hoffman. *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*. Cambridge University Press, NY, 2000, p. 247.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 65.

⁵⁰ James C. Harris. Social neuroscience, empathy, brain integration, and neurodevelopmental disorders. *Physiology & Behavior*, (79): 525–531, 2003. p. 525.

⁵¹ Lea Winerman. The mind's mirror. *APA monitor on psychology*. 2005. <http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct05/mirror.html> (accessed August 10, 2007).

⁵² Hume, 2005, pp. 245–247.

⁵³ Hoffman, 2000, pp. 293–294.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 282.

the brain. These areas are also associated with empathic processing.⁵⁵ Other studies have identified significant correlations between violent video game play and low empathy. Dr. Jeanne Funk, for instance, published a study which shows that high exposure to video game violence is strongly related to low empathy to an extent that does not appear to hold true for empathy and other violent media forms.⁵⁶ One might speculate that the difference lies in the distinction between passively receiving violence via the cinema, television, or internet, and actively causing the violent acts in video games. Dr. Bruce Bartholow's research confirmed the inverse relationship between violent video game exposure and empathy.⁵⁷ These studies are not conclusive, but they are quite suggestive.

It is also worth noting that the U.S. military uses violent video games to train soldiers. Lieutenant Colonel David Grossman explains that there is a natural aversion to killing one's own kind, so troops must be desensitized and conditioned in order to become willing and proficient killers.⁵⁸ The natural aversion that the lieutenant refers to may reside in our empathic faculties, in which case it seems plausible that some violent video games serve to reduce empathy in soldiers. Grossman suspects that many mainstream violent video games can have a disturbingly similar effect on children.⁵⁹

If Hume's conception of empathy is correct, then we now have a strong candidate for the source of moral wrongness in ultra-violent video games.⁶⁰ The problem with such games is that they may damage our empathic faculties, and in so doing, they may be

⁵⁵ Klaus Mathiak and Rene Weber. Toward Brain Correlates of Natural Behavior: fMRI during Violent Video Games. *Human Brain Mapping*, (27): 948–956, 2006. p. 954.

⁵⁶ Jeanne Funk, Heidi Baldacci, Tracie Pasold, and Jennifer Baumgardner. Violent exposure in real-life, video games, television, movies, and the internet: is there desensitization? *Journal of Adolescence*, 23–35, 2004.

⁵⁷ Bruce Bartholow, Marc Sestir, and Edward Davis. Correlates and Consequences of Exposure to Video Game Violence: Hostile Personality, Empathy, and Aggressive Behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(11): 1573–1586, 2005.

⁵⁸ David Grossman. Trained to Kill. *Killology Research Group*. 1998. http://www.killology.com/art_teach_killing.htm (accessed August 10, 2007).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ One need not accept Hume's entire moral theory in order to see this point. Other ethicists (e.g. Adam Smith) have incorporated empathy as a central factor in their moral views, lending support to some of the primary ideas presented in this paper. I thank Michael S. Pritchard for bringing this point to my attention.

directly harming our centers of moral judgment. An impaired capacity for moral judgment may not immediately or invariably translate into aggressive behavior, but such impairment might, at least initially, only impact one's *attitudes* toward characters and conduct. One might imagine that a damaged empathic faculty could cause an increased tolerance for moral depravity and a decreased appreciation for virtue. As these attitudes could manifest themselves in any number of ways, their effects might not be readily apparent. The point is that although most violent video gamers aren't out committing vicious crimes, this does not mean that they aren't being affected in other significant, though less obvious ways.

A Humean approach to assessing the moral significance of ultra-violent video games has several advantages. In the first place, it elucidates a direct connection between playing such games and moral harm. Its force does not depend solely upon unfavorable consequences that *might* occur in the future. Also, one need not subscribe to a robust sense of moral virtue or vice in order to see a problem. One need only recognize that human beings are socially and biologically constituted to make moral judgments, and anything that impairs this capacity should be suspect. A Humean conception of the empathic faculty, which has received significant support in recent literature, along with current studies on empathy and violent video games, suggests that such games warrant concern.

The implications of this view are not entirely clear. While some have called for stricter regulations on the sale and distribution of ultra-violent video games, others assert that suggestive research and speculation are not sufficient grounds for censoring game publishers or violating consumer liberties. A rash of recent court rulings has upheld the latter position. According to the Entertainment Software Association,

“The Courts have ruled nine times in six years that computer and video games are protected speech, and efforts by these legislative bodies to ban or limit access to or the sale of games they find objectionable will inevitably run afoul of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.”⁶¹

Efforts to regulate the sale of violent video games to minors have been systematically rejected by U.S. judicial decisions. The courts have responded that: (1) video games are protected under the First Amendment, (2) the current research does not demonstrate that violent video game play leads to

⁶¹ Entertainment Software Association. Facts & Research. *ESA*. 2007. http://www.thesa.com/facts/industry_self_reg.php.

actual violence, and (3) parents have the responsibility of gauging their children's video game exposure.⁶² Fortunately, the electronic gaming industry does have self-imposed regulations meant to prevent adult-themed material from falling into the hands of children. For instance, most console systems are equipped with parental control devices. Also, most console and PC games are rated for violent or sexual content. A central concern, however, is that children, who are still in the process of developing their empathic and moral capacities, continue to access ultra-violent video games.

A recent study found that 87% of boys under seventeen have played 'M' rated games (games intended for persons aged seventeen and older).⁶³ The same study revealed that 90% of teens say that their parents never check ratings before buying or renting games. It is also important to note that not all games are rated. In 2005, "Super Columbine Massacre RPG" became available for free download on creator Danny Ledonne's website.⁶⁴ In this game, the player controls Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as the two plan and execute the Columbine high school murders. Ledonne claims that over 10,000 people have downloaded Super Columbine Massacre, and since it is an independent or "homebrew" game, it has no official rating. It is likely that many children have played this game without their parents' knowledge. Ultra-violent video games are readily accessible to many youth, and their parents would do well to learn about the content and the potential effects of such games on their children.

Conclusion

I have argued that a Humean approach to assessing the moral significance of ultra-violent video games provides an apposite and advantageous framework for elucidating a potential connection between playing such games and moral harm. Hume emphasized the central role of empathy in making moral judgments, arguing that empathy is a universal human faculty which allows us to distinguish between vice and virtue. In so doing, Hume anticipated several recent discoveries in human psychology. Current

research shows that empathy is an integral aspect of moral development, and it also provides evidence that human empathy has biological and evolutionary foundations. Furthermore, recent studies have suggested that playing violent video games is inimical to empathic function. As empathic damage may not immediately or invariably translate into violent behavior, the effects of such games may be difficult to detect.

Many ultra-violent video games are readily available to children. The increasing technological sophistication of such games, including advanced graphics and interactive controllers, makes for a more realistic gaming experience. The accessibility and graphic realism of violent games could be cause for concern. It is likely that many parents are unaware of some measures that would facilitate safer, more proactive gaming experiences for their children. It is equally likely that many parents are uninformed about the research implicating violent video games as sources of psychological and moral harm. This analysis reveals a need for further research on violent video game exposure and empathy reduction, and it also suggests that more vigorous attempts to educate parents and the general public about the potential effects of ultra-violent video games may be necessary.

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⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8–18 Year Olds. *A Kaiser Family Foundation Study*. March 2005.

⁶⁴ Kevin Vaughan and Brian D. Crecente. Video game reopens Columbine wounds. *Rocky Mountain News*. May 16, 2006, http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/local/article/0,1299,DRMN_15_4702205,00.html.

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