A PHENOMENOLOGY

OF VIOLENT VIDEO

GAMES

By Christopher Henisse

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<u>Introduction</u>

"Back to the things themselves!" This is Edmund Husserl's rallying cry for phenomenology, a philosophy focused on the appearances of phenomenon from the viewpoint of a subject whose consciousness has been cleared of all preconceptions. That is a lot to take in, but this thesis will describe, not explain, phenomenology and how one can do it. From there, I will take up a phenomenology of video games, as well as violent ones, and then discuss the effects that these games have on individuals based on various psychological data.

I am a gamer. That means that I've played a lot of video games in my life, since I was three years old actually. I haven't played as much as some people, but I have enough experience to be considered competent on the subject of gaming. I've also played a lot of violent video games. These are video games where the goal is to usuall kill people within the games virtual world. Most modern multiplayer games are all about fighting other players over the internet and killing them for competitive purposes. Some argue that video games have adverse effects on people, specifically children. Psychology does show that this may be true for children.

At the core of this thesis is phenomenology, which in Greek literally means "that which appears", and is an area of thought within philosophy that I became acquainted with in my freshman year at UDM thanks to one of my professors, David Koukal, PhD. Throughout my time here I learned small bits of phenomenology, typically a graduate philosophy, whenever I could. This was usually through papers that Koukal had published. Eventually, thanks to my constant pestering, and the publishing of the book "Phenomenology: An Introduction" by Michael Lewis and Tanja Staehler, Koukal was able to make a phenomenology class for undergraduate students. It was in that class where the work on this thesis began. I started working on a phenomenology of video games, as I wanted to understand them more fully. How did video games appear to me in their giveness? This question forced to move forward and construct a phenomenology.

But why does one decide to take up phenomenology? I took mine up because video games are played by a lot of people worldwide (sixty percent of Americans play video games (ESA)) and because I wanted to understand what was essential to a game. Plus, video games have been criticized as the reason for public shootings in the past. An example of this is during the events of Columbine, Colorado. The two shooters were big fans of the violent video game "Doom." Understanding what is essential to a violent video game could help psychology understand why violent games cause aggression in some people. I live in a very violent country, and if I could find a possible reason to understand as to why it's so violent, then that should be enough reason to take up this task. Taking up a phenomenology of another phenomenon that doesn't seem as important, such as doors, may seem pointless. But, even mundane objects may be more important than once thought. Understanding the essentials of doors or the pizza box on the sidewalk allows the phenomenologist to have a richer experience of said phenomenon, and they can draw on these experiences to have a more fulfilling life. The goal of philosophy itself is wisdom, and phenomenology can definitely set one on the path towards it.

Chapter 1: The History of Phenomenology

Phenomenology's History

Phenomenology was a response to the Cartesian-dualistic viewpoint of the world that had dominated general thought for a couple centuries. Under this dualism, the world was separated between subjects and objects and there was very little crossover between the two. Everything in the world was and still is explained through cause and effect. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German philosopher and the founder of phenomenology, was receptive to the scientific world we lived in, but he had his worries. A mathematician, Husserl admired the positive sciences but saw them as an abstraction of the world. Husserl believed that there is a time when we experience the world before we got to know it through a theoretical attitude. He wanted us to go back to this time, to this "lived world," German for *lebenswelt*, where we could experience various phenomena in their givenenss without trying to explain them. But what exactly is phenomena referring to? Phenomena refers to anything that appears to one's consciousness, as everyone's consciousness is intentional, meaning that consciousness is always conscious of something, and thus, anything that appears to a consciousness can undergo a phenomenological description. The relationship between the subject and the object (usually the phenomenon in question) is quite important to a phenomenological description. Husserl wanted us to focus on this relationship that bridged the two states of subject and object, with the bridge being one's consciousness, in order to truly experience a phenomenon, hence the phrase "Back to the things themselves." So Husserl set out to build a scientific philosophy around this idea.

Husserl defines the state that we are commonly in as the "natural or theoretical attitude." This is the state where we explain everything. We use scientific theories and ideas to explain the world around us, usually in the form of facts. In phenomenology, we are looking for essences rather than facts. The essence of a phenomenon is whatever is essential to it.

The scientific method, while a highly resourceful method for researching and testing hypotheses, dominates the natural attitude and how we explain things in our daily lives and in our schooling systems. We focus on the "what" questions rather than the "how" questions that phenomenology wants us to ask, specifically how we experience some phenomenon. The scientific method asks the researcher to be objective, and only focus on the results; everything is cause and effect based. Husserl wants us to leave this natural attitude and focus on the lived world.

Leaving the natural attitude is a tough process. Husserl has a method, the phenomenological epochē, which one can use to "leave" it. Leaving it mainly refer to bracketing out various preconceptions about the world and its phenomena, which is what the epochē entails. The epochē has two steps or reductions, the transcendental reduction and the eidetic reduction. The transcendental reduction is when one purifies its consciousness of any preconceptions regarding theory, science, etc. This reduction exposes the transcendental ego, which is used to see the phenomena in the world as phenomena to be experienced rather than explained. Next is the eidetic reduction, which is where we reduce the phenomenon to its absolute essence by stripping away facts about it through imaginative variation, and cutting out anything that is not essential to it. This is how one can begin phenomenology. Husserl didn't lay out an exact method, as he was constantly starting over and trying to refine phenomenology. But this is a major step with describing essences though, as the essence of a phenomenon is always considered to be provisional and can be refined further. Phenomenology is an infinite task.

Edmund Husserl influenced a lot of philosophers with phenomenology. His most famous student Martin Heidegger, was one of the most well-known German philosophers of the 20th-century within the areas of existentialism and phenomenology. His magnum opus "Being and

Time," changed and influenced a lot of contemporary philosophy. Jean-Paul Sartre was a well-known French existentialist and phenomenologist who is famous for his various plays and his magnum opus "Being and Nothingness." Lastly came Maurice Merleau-Ponty, another French philosopher, who wrote a lot on phenomenology, specifically focusing on perception and the various aspects of the body and how the embodied subject experiences a phenomenon. Many continental philosophers today still teach and practice phenomenology, coming up with new and improved ways to teach it and well as revising its methods.
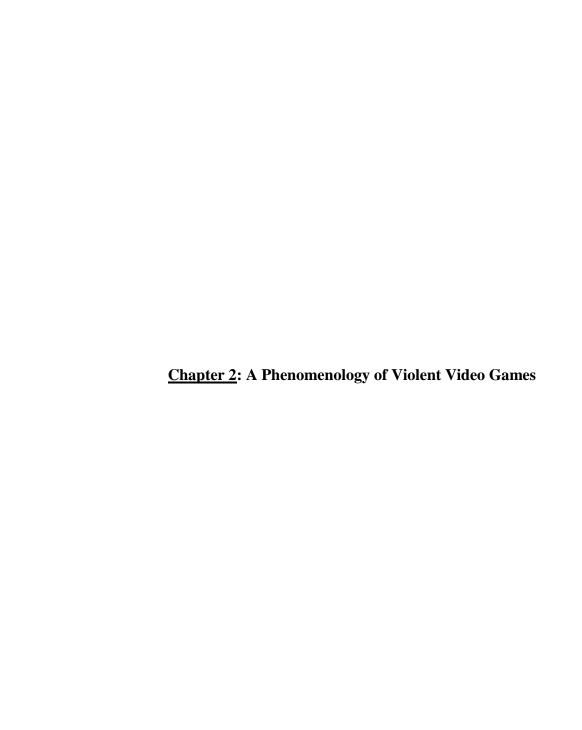
Phenomenological Methods

So how does one do phenomenology? Husserl laid out the beginnings for a method, but it was up to the other phenomenologists throughout time to continue his life's work. The purification of consciousness and imaginatively varying are excellent methods to use when taking up phenomenology. But these steps are usually performed at some point after the phenomenological investigation has begun. Various other philosophers have taken up phenomenology but haven't exactly laid out a step-by-step method, but one philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, started a method involving body hermeneutics that would later be used by a Canadian philosopher named Samuel Mallin. Another philosopher named Herbert Spiegelberg laid out a step-by-step process for phenomenology in groups, as he had taught an experimental class where groups of students took up various phenomena together. This method was used by the most recent phenomenology class that I took. My phenomenological method combines aspects of Husserl and Mallin with a little bit of Spiegelberg.

Mallin's method involved something called body hermeneutics. This method is performed by describing how the phenomenon interacts with the various body regions, or, as

Mallin preferred to call it: thinking with a pen. "Avail yourself, bodily, to the object: how does it ask you to move, to feel, to engage, to sense, to think? What regions of embodiment does it speak to, and how does it ask you to realign, adjust, notice, safeguard, open up, or otherwise exist as a body in relation to this thing (Mallin)?" Mallin's student Astrida Neimanis, explains all of this in great detail, translating Mallin's tricky language into something more accessible. The five regions of embodiment are as such: cognition, perception, social-affectivity, motility, and viscerality. Neimanis explains the theoretical and practical dimensions of these regions. Cognition refers to logic and rationality, which focuses on what the phenomena is, its role is in society, how it is categorized, etc. Perception refers to the senses that experience the phenomenon. Social-affectivity focuses on emotions and feelings, specifically, how the phenomenon affects the subject on an emotional level, and an interpersonal level. Descriptions of comfortability and alienation can arise within this body region. Motility focuses the movement that the body goes through when engaging with the phenomenon. Finally, viscerality refers to how the subject's internal organs respond to the phenomenon.

Following the body hermeneutics, one needs to then begin stripping away the facts through bracketing and imaginatively varying. As I glance over the five regions, I must discern what was fundamental about how I experienced the phenomenon and what was not fundamental. This part can also be done in groups as we have done in the "Phenomenological Practicum" here at UDM. Once you have stripped your phenomenon down to its essentials, you can come up with a provisional essence. Afterwards, you then revise the essence and begin again. Phenomenology is never-ending, but this method puts one on the right track towards a general essence.

Chapter 2: A Phenomenology of Violent Video Games

First, I feel I have to explore video games in general before exploring violent video games. I begin in the lived world.

Cognition:

A video game is a construct, comprised of electronics and animations that display a virtual world, all of which is found on a physical device that holds the game's data (like a flash drive). Video games date back as early as 1940, but the first video game system, the device that reads the game's data and projects it onto a display, created by Ralph Baer out of wood and various electronics, was released in 1967 (Play). Gaming has evolved immensely since then. Modern video games are more like interactive movies, as they look very realistic, and usually tell a story of some sort with characters voiced by real actors which help to deepen an immersion into the game's virtual world. Video games and movies have a lot in common actually. They both can have characters and a story that we as an audience or gamers can feel connections to. They are both projected via a display through the use of a solid device that holds their data. They are both heavily valued by group of people, with some claiming them to be expressive forms of art and others equivocating them to trash. They can both deal with "heavy-handed" issues such as religion, politics, terrorism, love, and other forms of social commentary. They are also both rated by organizations. Movies receive ratings from the MPAA, for the most part. Games in the United States receive an ESRB rating, which has similar age ranges to movie ratings. Films that are rated "R" may have strong language, sexual content, or intense violence. This is very similar to games that receive an "M" rating. The big difference between video games and movies is gameplay, where the gamer controls, in-game, some sort of virtual entity, whether it be a character, a hockey paddle, a death ray, or something else entirely. This is all done through the use of a controller or gamepad, which has different buttons and levers much like a keyboard.

Actually, most video games were first created through the use of a computer, and many people today prefer playing games on their computer, typically due to computer processing power being much greater than that of a home video game console.

Within a video game there are many things the gamer in the virtual world can do while controlling the virtual entity. Of course, the different actions that can be performed differs from game to game, and old games were played very differently from more modern games, but there are commonalities. The virtual entity can perform actions such as walking, running, fighting, exploring the virtual world, solving problems, interacting with characters, killing things, etc. Modern games present the virtual world and playable entity typically in a 3-D form, while older games were more 2-D due to the lack in technology. Modern games have also become quite complicated, with some very popular games taking years to make (these are comparable to summer blockbusters). Older games were more simple and required less time. Today, games that resemble these older games are called "indie games," much like "indie films." These games are usually made independent of a major game developer and publisher, and are sometimes made at the developer's home rather than in a massive studio. Like with some people preferring the simpler indie films that do not feature intense scenes of Hollywood action, many people prefer the simpler indie games that remind them of the good times they had growing up. Some of these old-style indie games are still extremely popular though. "Mario" still plays in a similar way to how it used to be played and continues to be one of Nintendo's most profitable properties.

Gaming is a billion-dollar industry that has and will continue to flourish within our media-driven society. Social networking has led to most "AAA" games (those summer blockbuster-style games) featuring some aspect of social-interaction via the internet. This usually

includes a multiplayer mode where other gamers can work together, destroy each other's virtual entities, or do something else entirely.

Motility:

When I walk into my college dorm room I usually hit the power button on my game console, flip open a game case, grab the disc and insert it into the disc drive. I then pick up one of my controllers, where my muscle memory immediately jumps into action as I place my fingers onto the back triggers and the palms of my hands curve around its plastic handles. My body is so well adapted to gaming that this movement is based on habit and at some point becomes muted in the background of my thought process. This is similar to how one drives a car. You almost forget how you got to wherever you were going because driving has become such a habit within your life. I never need to think about what I am doing, even after I've gone a week without gaming.

For the most part, gaming engages my hands and fingers. My fingers do most of the work: pushing buttons, pulling levers, wiggling control sticks, all while the palms of my hands grasp the controller. Depending on the game, I may need to use my fingers in a rhythmically quick manner. It's no wonder that gaming can cause carpal tunnel syndrome, as I'm using my hands so much that a prolonged play time of twelve hours or more usually leaves me with sore thumbs.

While my hands and fingers are a very important part of gaming, and for most people as well, the rest of the body is still involved, though sometimes it becomes muted. We use our eyes and ears to perceive the game, which is usually fundamental to playing. Sometimes my eyes become so focused on the game that I forget to blink and I do not realize this until I begin

experiencing pain within them. My eyes have become muted, almost absent in the Heideggerian sense, only becoming presence once a change has occurred. This is not the only time that the eyes become muted for gamers. For example, there are occasions where gamers will cover their eyes and play a game since they had it completely memorized. Handicapped individuals also play games, but typically through special devices that let them play. For example, I remember reading once about a young man who had a special headset that allowed him to play based on his eye blinks. There are a variety of other ways to use the body while gaming as well. In the past decade, motion gaming, which involves most of the gamer's body, has become quite popular thanks to the release of Nintendo's recent game console the "Wii." The Wii uses a small joystick that the gamer holds, and then stands in front of a small receptor that tracks their movement as they swipe the joystick in various directions. One can "bowl" on the Wii by doing the same motion one does while bowling. Microsoft also recently created the Kinect, which is for the latest iterations of the "Xbox." Similar to the "Wii", the "Kinect" is a motion-based system, but does not have a typical controller. Instead, the gamer is the controller and can use their arms and legs to do various actions. There is a game called "Fruit Ninja," where the gamer makes slashing motions with their arms to cut up virtual fruit.

A few other instinctual body motions may come up while gaming. I have on occasion, when angry at a game (usually because the virtual entity keeps dying during a frustrating part of a game) threw my hands up in the air or thrown my controller on the ground. Gaming can be frustrating, and a lot of people, when frustrated, act out with their body as a result. Then there are the gamers who have unintentional bodily reactions due to losing track of time. There have been cases where gamers have actually wet themselves. Their body became very muted as they were quite focused on the game. On other occasions, individuals have died playing games due to sleep

exhaustion. So there are a lot of ways that the body is involved with gaming, specifically in relation to the gaming controller, and reactions due to emotions or bodily problems.

Perception:

The major senses engaged when playing a video game are sight, touch, and sound. My hands grasp the controller, but it isn't nearly as important as the eyes and ears. My eyes are typically dead-locked on to the TV screen, as I tune out everything nearby to only focus on the game and its sights and sounds. This is very much like watching an intriguing film where the time seems to just disappear because of your engagement with it. My gaze is focusing on everything in the virtual environment while listening for the sound of a nearby virtual character, enemy, or just passively listening to the game's music. There are only a few things that can interrupt this gaze. The need to use the restroom is the most common interruption, as well as my roommate walking in front of the display. Sometimes I have found myself not reacting to his presence and just automatically moving my head as he walks by so I don't miss anything on the screen. Here I am similar to the sports fanatics popularized on television who overreact when someone stands in front of the screen, minus the overreactions of course. Another thing that interrupts my gaze is when I am speaking to someone, either my roommate, a visiting friend, or my friends online, who I communicate with via a gaming headset. I must note though that I do not always end up engaged so deeply with a game. Not all games are interesting, and the boring ones do not engage me. This is similar to boring films or books. When reading a very boring textbook I constantly lose the engagement since there is nothing interesting to attract the attention of any of my senses.

My sense of sound is only interrupted when the volume is too high and causes the TV speakers to pop, which breaks the engagement with the game, but only briefly. Sometimes though, a loud noise nearby will cause a brief lapse of engagement. My sense of touch isn't completely muted, but plays a background role. I do not need to focus on it unless I have recently injured my hand and playing a game causes me pain. The sense of taste and smell are completely muted here and play no part in the perceptual process of gaming. Perhaps they will play a part someday as gaming is evolving constantly.

There is a certain distance preferred by gamers when playing. Most gamers, myself included, prefer to be up-close to small screens and at a medium distance to larger ones, but the closer the distance the less mistakes we make while playing. But there are circumstances that cause this to change, such as how I am feeling. If I do not feel my best then I will sit back further away. If I really want to get into gaming, then the distance between the screen and I is very minimal.

Social-Affectivity:

As I play a game that has some sort of objective-based story, the virtual entity that I play as is usually a human, a virtual one anyway. This virtual human is typically a male, though the prominence of female main characters is increasing exponentially, who usually has to perform various actions, sometimes violent, sometimes not, within sequences of gameplay in order to survive to the next level or mission. The games I usually play are heavy into story and character development and my emotions play a role in these games similar to watching a movie that triggers various emotions. Playing as a character, I almost feel like I embody him or her, as I control them, but embodiment is such a strange phenomenon. The character that I feel like I

embody is a virtual character. Can a human subject embody a virtual character? Is this virtual character a virtual subject? Does it have subjectivity? No, it does not. A virtual character is either controlled by the gamer or has scripted language and actions. I do not think that the virtual character is a subject and I do not think that a gamer can truly embody the virtual entity since it is only a virtual creation with a virtual construct. But then why do I feel the emotions that the virtual character feels in the game? This is similar to when an actor embodies the character they are playing and feels deeply invested in the character so much that they feel everything that their character is supposed to feel. In that moment, they become their character. While I am not expressing the emotions of the character I am playing, I still experience everything that s/he are experiencing and thus when the character reacts with great emotion, so do I, and I cry or my hands may even start to shake. I begin to become emotionally closer with the other characters in the virtual world around me. In games that focus on two major characters for the entire game, one of which I play, I usually fall for the other character, not in a romantic sense, but in the sense that the character I am playing deeply cares for the other character, which results in me doing so as well. For example, in "The Last of Us", I play as Joel, a hardened survivor in a post-apocalyptic world, whose main mission is to escort a young girl across the United States. Joel becomes a surrogate father figure to this young girl, Ellie. Joel, who lost his real daughter much earlier in the game, begins to see Ellie as his own daughter and wants to do everything in his power to protect her from all harm. I feel the same emotions as Joel as I try to keep her from harm, even though from a gameplay aspect she cannot die. I cried when his real daughter died too, despite only knowing her for twenty minutes of gameplay. I felt that same surge of despair that flowed through Joel's veins when his baby girl received a fatal gunshot wound. I think this speaks to the emotions people have as human beings. People react similarly when they watch a

film. They may cry and feel the exact same despair of the character/actor on the screen. But these emotions do not happen in all games. A game like Pong isn't going to affect a gamer on an emotional level. Also angry emotions can come up when the gamer gets frustrated at a part of a game or if the game is getting increasingly hard.

Some games may make us feel uncomfortable, which can also lead to emotional reactions. Games that are grotesquely violent or sexual may cause some discomfort with the gamer. While on the other end, a game that a gamer really enjoys or finds is similar to his/her life, such as a social-simulation game like "The Sims," will cause them great comfort, and they would probably feel as if they were welcomed by the game.

Games can provide a variety of relationships. Interpersonally, gamers can become friends while playing a game online. They could also become enemies due to the competitive nature of gaming. On a person-object level, games provide enjoyment for gamers. They allow gamers to practice and become very skilled, and push them to move forward and complete objectives. Of course some games may be poorly made and a gamer would not find it enjoyable to play said game, especially if they spent money on that game.

Viscerality:

Emotions go hand in hand with this body region because when I get emotional, my body reacts in different ways. In a deeply sad scene from "The Last of Us" my cheeks redden, my heartbeat increases, and tears stream down my face. While playing a game that angers me, usually due to constant dying, I end up with an increased heartbeat and my hands grip the controller very tightly. With horror games, gamers usually have very visceral reactions. Horror games are typically harder and focus on survival. I move the virtual entity down a dark hallway,
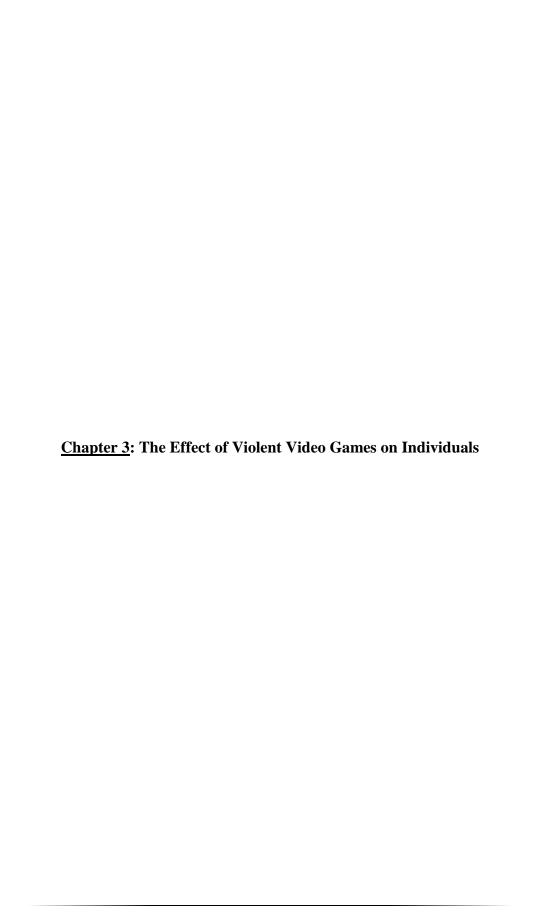
flashlight and gun in hand. I am on high alert and the hair is rising on my skin, I get goose bumps, my heartbeat may start to quicken, and then, if something unexpectedly jumps out at me, I shriek with fright. Similar to an angry reaction, I usually end up gripping the controller tightly without realizing it. In these horror games I am alienated and alone which makes the experience all the scarier. Some gamers cannot even play these games for very long and receive anxiety from the experience.

The Essence of Video Games

So what is essential to a video game? Going through the body regions I have noticed a few things. First, gaming requires a human subject, a gamer, to play the game. Second, some sort of controller is needed to play the game. This could be an actual gamepad, your actual body (in the case of the Wii and Kinect), or some sort of device that lets you play the game (like the headset for the handicapped individual). Third, the virtual entity is required. Every game has the gamer playing as something. A human character, a hockey paddle, an Italian plumber who is skilled at jumping on the heads of his enemies, or something else entirely. Fourth, the game needs something to be processed on. A video game is just a device that holds data. You need something to run the game in order to play it. Without a game system or computer, then all you have is a disc to collect dust on the shelf. All four of these are essential to a video game. Without them, a video game is no longer a video game. Is that all though? Are emotions important to all video games? Not necessarily. Some games might feature no emotional scenes. What about sights and sounds? All video games are visual. I am certain there is a chance that could change, but for now, gaming is a visual activity. A virtual world is visual. Sound is not necessary though, as the sound can be muted, yet the gamer can still play. Do games require a story and characters?

When gaming first became a major phenomenon, none of the games had any story. What about gameplay? Gameplay is actually a very important part of a game, and what separates it from film. Gameplay is what allows the gamer to control the virtual entity and allows the gamer to enter a virtual world. Gameplay and the control over the virtual entity is what causes the gamer to become so engaged with a video game. I think that the aspect of control is quite important here, and also helps to separate a game from a film. If you took away the control from the gamer, then a video game would just be a movie. Therefore, many aspects of a video game are essential to it. The essence of a video game is a virtual construct, featuring a virtual entity controlled and played by a human subject within a virtual world, via a physical controller and game console. As always this essence is provisional and can be refined later on if other essentials to a video game can be found.

Now, how are violent video games different than video games? The obvious answer is that they are violent. But how are they violent? Typically they feature weapons that the virtual entity can use to kill other virtual characters or entities, online or otherwise. Some video games feature small elements of violence but are not considered to fall under "violent video games." Typically games for children feature small elements of cartoony, combative violence, but killing is usually never involved. For other games though, they are violent once the virtual entity can take the "life" of another virtual character away, killing them, or if the game features extremely violent actions (such as torture). So the essence of a violent video game is not much different than that of video games. The essence of a violent video game is a virtual construct, featuring a virtual entity that has the ability to kill or severely injure other virtual characters or entities within a virtual world, via a physical controller and game console.

Chapter 3: The Effect of Violent Video Games on Individuals

Shigeru Miyamoto, a video game developer, once said: "Video games are bad for you? That's what they said about rock n' roll." Violent video games have been the subject of controversial debate for years now. From public shootings, to children having anger issues, violent games have typically been blamed. Do violent games result in poor social skills and aggression in children and adults? My research seems to indicate that it definitely causes aggression.

Any psychology major will most likely believe that violent video games can cause aggression in people because they know who Albert Bandura is. Bandura is a psychologist most well-known for his "social learning theory," and the "Bobo doll," experiment. The theory is this idea that behavior can be vicariously learned based on experiencing other behaviors, and whether or not punishments and rewards are given out for said behaviors (Bandura). This was represented by his "Bobo Doll" experiment where children were allowed to play with various toys, including a Bobo Doll. A Bobo Doll is an inflatable toy that has some kind of weight in the bottom of it to keep it from falling over, thus, when a children kicks or hits it, it will fall backwards and sit back up. When children observed the people running the experiment playing with aggressive toys like Bobo and acting aggressively, the children responded similarly. This would lead a psychologist to believe that in video games, where there is usually no punishment for killing and aggressive action (since it is not real life), and these games sometimes reward gamers for their violent actions, then this would inspire people to act aggressively or even kill without consequence.

Bandura's finding is what has most likely lead to research into violent video games, mostly with how it affects children. "Approximately 90% of children in the U.S. play video games, and more than 90% of those games involve mature content that often includes violence

(Park)." So around 81% of children in the U.S. play violent video games. The "Time" article that mentions this talks about the inconsistent data on the effects of video game violence. This inconsistent data prompted President Obama to have more data retrieved on this controversial topic (Park). The article also makes reference to a study done by scientist Craig Anderson in the journal "Pediatrics." The study involves Japanese children in middle and high school, as well as American children in grade school. The way the study worked was the experimenters had the children play these violent games, and then examined their behaviors over the months that passed after the experiment. The results of the experiment found that habitually playing violent video games increased physical aggression, and that these behaviors happen despite the cultures the children lived in (United States vs. Japan). "That both cultures yielded significant longitudinal effects of approximately the same magnitude illustrates the power of violent video games to affect children's developmental trajectories in a harmful way (Anderson, Sakamoto and Gentile)." Video games seem to have a detrimental effect on the behavioral growth of children. They can lead to aggression and desensitization to violence.

Another study, also headed by Craig Anderson, published in "Science Direct," examined how violent games affected individuals' reactions or lack of reaction to violence. This study defines desensitization as "A narrower, clearer definition of desensitization to violence is a reduction in emotion-related physiological reactivity to real violence (Carnagey, Anderson and Bushman)." For this experiment, the participants, college students, played violent games for a short period of time and then watched a recording a real-life violence. The results of this experiment were actually quite extraordinary. Even after only playing a game for twenty minutes, the participants reacted with a much duller response to images of real-life violence (stabbings, beatings, shootings). The violent games had in fact desensitized them to real-life

people getting hurt. This desensitization could have detrimental effects on individuals, but the study does mention that sometimes, such a desensitization is not a bad thing. Doctors and nurses need to be desensitized from such horrible images since they need to be able to perform surgical actions, as do members of the military. The problem though is when the average citizen becomes so desensitized that they may not think twice if the thought of killing someone comes up.

So psychology has indeed found that violent games can lead to physical and mental aggression and desensitization to real-life violence. Does it destroy your social skills though? Most of the studies mention that video games are believed to lead to aggression, desensitization, and make individuals anti-social rather than pro-social. A study though, disproves the negative affect on social interactions, for the most part. In this study, found in the journal "PLOS One," participants played four types of games: pro-social, anti-social, violent, and non-violent. Afterwards, someone would drop something in front of them and the experimenters recorded who helped the person dropping something and who did not. Three experiments were performed and the end results failed to find that violent video games poorly affected pro-social behavior (Tear and Nielson).

Overall, violent video games do indeed cause aggression in gamers. Bandura's theory is most likely correct. Performing violent actions within a virtual world when there is not risk for doing so and usually a reward, teaches children specifically that acting out violently will have no consequences. And it seems to cause adults to become desensitized to real-life violence, which is a definite problem. But, gaming does not seem to make people anti-social, which does make sense more-so today since gaming has traditionally always been a group activity. And its connections to the internet these days allow for even more cooperation among others. Violent games do cause problems though, and I think that more research should be done on this topic to

further discern as to whether or not the aggression and desensitization would lead to people

having no qualms with taking the lives of others.

<u>Concluding Remarks</u>

So what can we take away from this? Violent video games are experienced as virtual constructs that give the gamer the ability to kill or severely hurt other virtual characters. Despite that these video games are not "real-life," they have poor effects on the mental health of individuals. They cause aggression in individuals, whether it be physical or mental, and can lead to a lack of an emotional "human" response to something violent in the real world.

We live in a violent world. The country I was born in began in violence. I think this thesis says something about our culture as a whole. We are violent. We like violence. We think it's cool. I think it's cool. I love violent video games and movies. I read comic books too and those are incredibly violent. Yet, I don't act aggressively towards others. Sure I get angry and have angry thoughts, but I could never see myself harming another living person, or animal for that matter. Even though I think guns are cool in video games and I've learned a lot about them I am unsure if I would ever buy one. I wouldn't want to ever accidentally hurt someone. I wouldn't want that on my conscience. So am I an outlier? Am I different than the people in these test groups? Or is my aggression just hidden deep within me? If it is, then the rest of my friends are also in trouble as they all play violent video games as well. And while gun violence is quite common in this country, it seems to usually be related to individuals in power or with mental-handicaps. This is why I've always had such a problem with psychology stating that violent games can lead to violence in individuals. I obviously think that children shouldn't play them, and I can totally see why a child would perceive a violent action within a game as an okay reaction to have in real life. Children are impressionable and Bandura definitely proved that. And that's why rating systems are in place, just like with movies. While I think that perhaps we should adopt the slightly-stricter European rating system, PEGI, the American one, ESRB, accurately portrays what will be seen in a video game. At that point it is up to the parents to not

buy a child such a violent game. Yet parents still let their children play these games. Is parenting

the issue here? Or should these games outright be banned? Even the more non-violent countries

play these games though. Guns are mostly illegal in the U.K, and that is one of the more popular

areas for violent video gaming. Of course the legality of guns may not correlate to aggression

within individuals. But I wouldn't mind seeing a study about that. Which is why I think that this

may all come down to the culture we thrive in. Violence has always seemed to be a part of our

nature as human beings. 200 years ago killing was just something people did. Of course society

has changed for the better, but perhaps that inherent violence has never fully left. We see

violence everywhere. I scroll down my Facebook feed every day and I have to see someone

dying from an accident with a gun (hence my hesitation to ever use one). Or I see some news

story about ISIS or some horrible act of terror. The next summer tent-pole "Avengers" movie is

about a robot attempting to kill off the human race. Violence is all around us. It is a part of our

daily lives. Is that the issue here? Violent media rather than video games. Of course that does not

make violent games innocent, but I think this leads to a much larger problem. More research

would be needed to further explore this issue though.

One cannot forget about the positives to video games though. They do seem to promote

pro-social behavior. They are respected art forms and help strengthen hand-eye coordination.

Game developers do realize that violence is sometimes unnecessary and a thus, many games

reward you for completing missions non-violently. Of course there are many more that reward

the gamer for solving every problem with a gun, but the existence of non-violent options show

me that violence isn't always the answer. We could go further with this, giving real-life rewards

for completing games non-violently or for playing games that are not violent at all. Also video

games are more progressive than other forms of art. While games are male-dominated, female

protagonists are becoming much more common in the gaming realm rather than in the realm of film. There are still issues there, but change is coming. Games deal with real-life topics that some people like to ignore. Protesting movements, human augmentation, the issue of violence, espionage, corporate vs. government power, love, human sacrifice, religion, family, etc. All of these issues I have seen violent games take up. So I am stuck between two sides now. I wonder if we need to seriously re-think how video games work and try to make them less violent. Or I wonder if we don't really need to change them and perhaps we just need to change our culture or our species. Maybe we should just be teaching kids to never act aggressively towards others, at least not in overly-violent ways. That could allow us to still play violent games and be a non-violent culture. But, would a non-violent culture play violent games? That remains to be seen. Some game developers have called violence in video games a "necessary evil." I think that may be true. One thing I can say though: I am still a gamer, even after writing this. I am a gamer who is unsure of where he should take a stance on this issue, but still fundamentally a gamer.

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