

A PROJECTIVE IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE ON VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES CONTROVERSY⁹

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Abstract: While the debate continues on whether video games are good or bad in academic communities around the world, some fundamental questions remain unanswered, questions that might change the perspective this problem has been looked upon so far: what exactly do we mean by “good” and “bad”. Many studies have been conducted by advocates of either side, most providing contradictory and debatable evidence to sustain either perspective.

This article aims to constructively analyze some of the most impactful claims which set this debate in motion using projective identity as a vantage point, a crucial state made possible by digital games in a very profound way. By means of comparison, analogy and critic interpretation of facts, we try to identify what “good” and “bad” could possibly mean when talking about digital gaming.

Keywords: projective identity, digital gaming, violent video games controversy.

What is projective identity?

While the term seems to speak by itself, most non-gamers and most psychologists would tend to understand it differently, misunderstand or oversimplify it, along with overlooking some crucial implications it has on the gamer. Projective identity is definitely not projected identification, and although the terms may be similar they reflect different concepts altogether.

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Therefore, in order to understand how projective identity works in digital gaming we should first and foremost establish the context and framework in which it is made manifest: digital gaming.

Since none of the definitions found in literature satisfies this article's specific needs, we will take the freedom to define digital games as interactive simulated environments, available on a wide range of platforms (consoles, PC, tablets, smartphones etc.) operated through a user interface, with the aim to entertain, educate or train consumers.

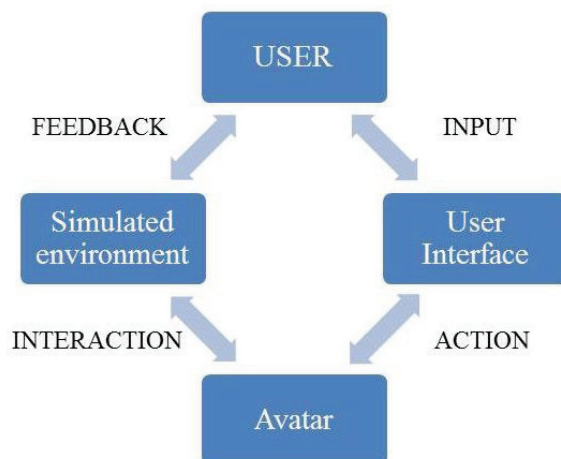
Since simulation alone is interactive in most cases and is in fact a virtual emulation of environments, featuring elements that can be manipulated, assuming digital games and simulation are in fact the same thing might be an easy but wrong assumption.

There are two key-differences between digital games and simulation. "One is that most (but not all) video games have a win state, and the other is that gamers don't just run a simulation, they microcontrol elements inside the simulation". (Gee 2008)

The win state is something that simulation can emulate as well. If the "win state" of an airplane pilot is to safely land the aircraft in bad weather or to successfully avoid a storm on the simulator in order to pass his evaluation, then obviously, his goal becomes a win state. On the other hand, the training and evaluation is what the simulated environment ought to be about by design, and it only becomes a win state for the pilot. In this case, the win state of the simulation is no more than the win state of any exam, training or evaluation session. In games, the win state is something desirable by default, residing in the very core of it by design.

The second difference is deeply connected to the projected identity factor. While in simulations one directly interacts with the environment, in games, an anchor is used to do it for the gamer. This anchor is most of the times, an avatar which is both part of the simulated environment and part of the user since the user cannot interact with the environment in absence of it.

Graphically, the process looks like this:



First off, the user interacts with the avatar through the user interface. This action is in fact a competence since the user must know and understand both the input methods and the user interface, and get familiar with them in order to

master enough input skill to ensure the desired commands are given to the avatar as intended. After the avatar is successfully and efficiently under the control of the user, it starts interacting with the environment. The user only gets the desired feedback if the process is successfully completed. Different constructs of various designs which make up the genres of the video games have placed this avatar in many positions.

In some video games, the avatar is simply an entity which commands armies to perform different actions while queueing productions and constructing buildings. While all of these actions are just commands given to obedient subjects, all of these have to be carried out in full detail, since none of the subjects would do anything unless instructed upon. This kind of “supreme commander” avatar represents the standard construct for most real-time-strategy and turn-based-strategy games.

A different type of avatar is found in virtual sim games, where the “sims” have behavior and freedom and are uncontrollable by the avatar. In most city-building games, the population is made out of such sims. They have satisfaction levels based on various – and sometimes very complicated – systems which push them to act in various ways. The avatar has ways of channeling and influencing their behavior but not force them since their actions are their own.

While there are many more forms avatars can take in games, we will not list them here, but instead look upon the least-abstract and most personal type of avatar found mainly in role-play games. This genre has rapidly taken over and successfully leads the gaming industry.

In a role-play-game or RPG, the avatar is simply a creature, a person, which can be shaped in various ways, from the looks to the skills and is very versatile when it comes to mirroring the general and specific preferences of the user. This type of avatar is highly customizable, usually humanoid (and if not, a cool version of other creatures, inspired from reality or pure fiction) and reflects the user’s temperament, personality and character, values and beliefs in many ways.

One of the most successful genres to emerge was the MMORPG – massively multiplayer online role-playing game. In this type of RPGs, massive numbers of players are integrated into the same world, interacting with it and with each-other in either PVE (player versus environment) or PVP (player versus player) activities which can take different organizational forms: cooperation, competition, team-based cooperation or competition and so on. These games tend to form large communities of avatars from the vantage point of the simulated environment which translates into user communities outside of the game world.

In the RPG genre, the avatar really shines, being the direct projection of the user's identity. Thus, a definition of projected identity could be formulated so that it becomes understandable in the specific way we intend it to be understood: as the virtual embodiment of a person, carrying the psychological traits, values, and emotions into the game world.

How does projective identity work?

One crucial aspect of projective identity is that not only the user shapes the identity of the avatar, according to self, but the environment, experiences, expectations and roles that avatar assumes also shapes the way the user develops. There is virtually no limit in the exchanges between the identities.

For instance, if the user's identity in a F1 racing game is the pilot's, the pilot is now the user and controls the vehicle. As the user dictates the behavior of the driver in terms of driving style, fair-play, technique, strengths and weaknesses, the experience of "being a car", backfires – so to say – to the user which experiences the feel of a flat or used-up tire which might require a pit stop. This effect causes the user to adapt his behavior to the requirements of the game, to give in to its limitations, practice, solve problems, and develop into "being" a better car for the next race. As drivers in real life "become" the vehicle they operate, so does the user become the avatar, which in this case, is actually a car. The disappearance of the driver avatar when driving the vehicle follows the same rules as the disappearance of self when driving a real vehicle in real life.

The learning process takes place in a continuous form and shapes the user's perception, widening it to blend in with the avatar and the only impairment the user might face in getting constant unobstructed feedback in a continuum in this way, is his inability to control the avatar in terms of input skills and/or user interface efficient employment.

The feedback effect of projective identity occurs because of the way social identity works (Wenger, et al. 1998, 2002). If we take another example of a game in which the avatar is a 14th century knight, the user projects his identity upon it, but not only the avatar hosts the projection of the user, rather the user himself hosts the knight in reversed effect.

Let us say, for instance that this particular user wants to kill innocent peasants because they mock his heraldry – which is part of the storyline in the game. Let's suppose that the game-world rules will either not allow him to do so – by invalidating attack action attempts upon civilians or innocent people – or will penalize him for doing so – either by attacking him with an overwhelming number of guards or by lowering an important score or rating. This automatically means that the

social identity taken by the user within the game is enforcing its rules upon him. This way, in order to have a satisfactory game experience he has to comply to a certain conduct while in this role, since his current identity dictates: he is a good knight.

Even more complex, if while in a MMORPG, one's avatar tends to have a nasty behavior toward other players' avatars, the other players will perceive the user, not the avatar and the relationship will pierce through the virtual veil and will have the feel of a user-to-user conflict. But if the performance of the user within the game according to the role he plays is low which bothers co-players, the relationship will be filtered from avatar to avatar, regardless of the attitude or character of the low-performing user.

In other words, mimicking reality, a poor professional will have his status altered professionally, while a poor member of society will have his social status altered if not both. In MMORPGs, the same type of mechanism seems to apply. The only difference being that the semiotic domain in this case is the game, and just like physicians play the physics game, and all of them have certain levels of acknowledgement and recognition, performance, hierarchies, restrictions and liberties provided by these rules of the physician's scientific community, Rift* players play the Rift game, transferring the same behaviors inside the semiotic domain of Rift.

While the semiotic domain of some digital game is comparable in terms of scientific or social importance to "serious" semiotic domains like linguistics or chemistry is beyond the point of this paper and even if it may not seem so at a first glimpse, highly debatable, especially since many of the games dabble very much in many sciences, even though they ought to serve the purpose of entertainment.

Are in the end digital games good or bad?

This topic is highly debated with fervent advocates on either side. On one hand we have "90% of pediatricians and 67% of parents which agree or strongly agree that violent video games can increase aggressive behavior among children", (Grabmeier 2014) and since most successful commercial video games contain violence, these views cause matter to many. On the other hand, while sales of violent video games have significantly increased – from 1994 to 2014 by 204% (Morris 2015, Pollson 2015) – violent crime rates have decreased by 37% and murders by juveniles acting alone by a significant 76% in the same time.

* Rift is a MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) which is situated in a fantasy world, and is characterized by in co-op play, competitive co-op play, solid community, and a very complex, active combat and social roles in-game system

A simple critical analysis of the two aspects presented above instantly reduces them to words, numbers and opinions, none of which hold any scientific value whatsoever. The fact that 90% of the pediatricians used to believe that witnessing aggressive behavior will reduce the likelihood of being aggressive because it would cause repulsion before Bandura's theory proved the opposite, didn't make them less wrong. Thus, by syllogism, it would be safe to assume they have beliefs now in the light of Bandura's theory which they ought to have learned. Whatever the case, neither experience nor public opinion were ever considered scientific evidence according to the scientific method.

As for the second argument insinuating how increases in video game sales should have led to higher crime rates if violent video games were indeed increasing aggressive behavior, is pure speculation. There are so many things, from policies and regulations to fluctuations in living standards which can cause crime rates to raise or drop (Goldberger et. al. 2008) that the sales in video games is probably somewhere at the bottom of the causality factors, and correlation does not equal causality.

With the general public issues and large-scale 10-years long studies clarified as unreliable for at least the aforementioned reasons, we can aim at some other, more specific claims that appeal to psychological theory to sustain them.

Among the most frequently quoted experts in the debate are Bushman BJ and Anderson CA (Hall, Day, 2011) which have conducted a series of experiments identifying desensitizing effects caused by violent media consumption (Bushman, Anderson, 2009) a study which ended up drawing rash conclusions from very low differences between control and experimental groups. They did the same study on both video game consumption and violent video content. Their methods and results were highly debated by the opposing scholars, who argued that aside from the fact that the differences between scores were too low at best; the methods used during the experiments were not consistent with the way media is consumed in general which renders their study irrelevant, alongside the inconsistencies and errors found in the methodology used by the two. (Greitemeyer 2014)

On the other hand, the voices of contradiction claims violent video games are rather beneficial to the development of certain skills, and fast-paced action in an environment that requires intense focus will increase peripheral attention and reactive decision-making capabilities (Ferguson, 2007).

While the debate rages on between two factions, one thing becomes clearer and clearer: the problems are addressed in very different

ways, and starts looking more like a clash of beliefs, and beliefs have nothing to do with science.

In this situation, one can only take the facts and make sense of them as they are. If studies are inconclusive because they try to contradict each-other with research that measures completely different aspects of the problematic, then another approach is obviously needed to shed some light on the matter.

From the vantage point of projective identity, all studies can be taken into consideration as valuable information and the reason for this is the very mechanic upon which projective identity functions. Logic dictates that if two phenomena are circularly-interconnected, they must influence each-other since the very principle upon which the wheel functions stand behind it.

Although it may be so that video games cause aggressive behavior, desensitize, fire-up aggressive tendencies in adolescents, it is also true that not only adolescents play video games, there has to be a dormant aggressive tendency to begin with that will be fueled to fire-up, and aggression is nothing more than human nature after all. As for desensitization, aside from the fact that not nearly enough evidence has been provided to prove it, even if violent games would actually cause desensitization, it can, nonetheless be one of the negative aspects of playing video games. It would make sense from a projective identity perspective for desensitization to take place, especially when talking about highly realistic-looking and sounding environment and effects.

Taking an example of a brutal and aggressive, M-rated** FPS (first-person-shooter)*** – Quake, it's easy to see that the purpose of that game is to entertain through fast-paced action involving a wide variety of weapons, brutal effects, gore and blood, in a Sci-Fi anarchic future, where factions or just individuals shoot each-other to the death. In this particular game, shooting others is what you ought to do. The avatar is invisible to the user, and the only thing the user sees out of the avatar is the end of gun barrels. While such a game could be easily looked upon as aggression incarnate, it's unrealistic setting, alongside constant revival of the fallen, combined with the amount of rockets an avatar can withstand before actually dying to be resurrected at a beacon, makes it pure fiction

** M rating in ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board) stands for mature, 18+ respectively, and recommends the rated software only for mature consumers.

*** In a PFS game, the view of the user is only limited by the edges of the monitor as if in the middle of the action, hence the name "first-person" which comes from the first-person perspective.

for any non-pathological mind, and if none of it can be transposed in real life because it makes no sense, it can't form grounds for aggressive behavior. Assuming that such content can lead to aggressive behavior within the age group that should consume the game, is like assuming a teenager shouldn't watch Tom & Jerry because there is a risk he might try to fly an umbrella from atop of a building.

On the other hand, if such a game is played by a child which cannot relate to the fiction as pure, and cannot taste the formal aspects of the game and stays stuck in the informal graphical blood-soaked, brutal environment, that only means the game is simply not for him and he should not, by any means, play it.

Studies have to take into consideration the variety of video games, even violent video games. Violence is part of life and nature, and trying to ban or take out of the market video games on the basis that they contain violence and children have access to it is like banning shows depicting lions hunting zebras or fighting with hyenas. A child may be as visually traumatized or heartbroken after seeing a lioness hunting a zebra-cub as can be after playing a video game that contains violence, even if he is the protagonist of the violent act. Because while the assumed in-game identity as an avatar shapes in its turn the thoughts and feelings of the user, the user has the plug, and can decide when the game stops. Obviously, like any other media type, the consumption of age-appropriated material is crucial in order to avoid psychological trauma or behavior mimicry from fictional characters – which have indeed a strong potential to cause changes in behavior.

The benefits of video games go as far as the simulation environment has the capacity to integrate senses and vividly simulate worlds, situations, relationships, connections, content and so on. It has the capacity to teach through various methods and what games teach can indeed be lethal or beneficiary for the individual or society. Like any other forms of media or culture out there, games mimic reality, twist it into fantasy and stimulate cognition, feelings, through the exploration of areas or environments, behaviors or mechanisms, reactions and interactions.

Both good and bad have been present in our cultures, arts, games and stories for as long as humanity has existed, and never the so-called promotion of certain behaviors have been destructive on the long-run. The finality matters, the lessons learned, the experience gained, the perspectives explored, and the development that follows them.

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