Games for Fun and Games for Blood: A Framework for Understanding In-Game Violence

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The interdisciplinary nature of game studies situates the field at the crossroads of the humanities and social sciences, among others. Reflecting on its progression from its recent history to the present, we can identify *in-game violence*[1] as an under-explored concept within the existing body of knowledge. While game studies scholars have addressed violence in digital games, much of the discourse tends to present a binary distinction between the "representational" and "systemic" properties of games in relation to in-game violence (Sicart 2009; Tavinor 2017; Schott 2016). The prevailing view suggests that the representation of violence does not negatively impact players; instead, it is the systemic qualities of games that play a more significant role in shaping player experience. This approach, however, delineates what does not constitute violence in digital games, rather than "seeking positive articulations of what violence means in different types and genres of gaming, to different kinds of players in different situations" (Klevjer 2018).

Based on that premise, this study initiates a multidisciplinary exploration of the concept of violence, as has been theorized in various academic fields. Defining violence presents challenges, not only because of its complexity, but also due to the lack of consensus on whether it can be understood as a single phenomenon (Brubaker and Laitin 1998). The meanings of violence are multiple, complex and often contradictory. According to certain conceptualizations however, violence entails and necessitates the interplay of a *perpetrator-witness-victim* in order to be perceived as such (Kerr 2005; Stanko 2003; Staudigl 2014).

This intersection of game studies research on in-game violence with social psychology is especially fruitful. Social psychologists and media-effects scholars, fiercely debate the relationship between the so-called "violent videogames" and violence in everyday life, exploring whether a "bleed" exists (Anderson and Bushman 2001). In-game violence has largely been studied through a social psychology lens, often involving the direct application of theories and methodologies from that field (Ferguson 2007). However, this approach tends to overlook the rich body of work within game studies

e.g., agency (Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009), immersion (Calleja 2011), kinaesthetic engagement (Kirkpatrick 2009) and player-figure relations (Vella 2015). Game studies, particularly in relation to kinaesthetic engagement[2], offer a valuable foundation for integrating theories from social psychology, while accounting for the medium-specific elements unique to digital games.

Thus, a new framework for understanding in-game violence can shed light on broader concepts of violence, particularly in digital spaces, and contribute to the multidisciplinary discourse on the subject. By using digital games as a lens to explore how players engage with violence and its meanings, we can gain deeper insights. Central to this exploration are the embodied cognition involved in gaming and the kinaesthetic experience of violence, which serve as a starting point.

Embodiment refers to the notion that our living and experiencing bodies are fundamental to our cognition (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Husserl 1989). Additionally, it presents a framework for cognition that has received increased academic traction over the past decades (Ekdahl 2021). This embodied understanding is important in order to shed light to violence phenomena in digital games, particularly when the player is spectating on-screen violence as a *witness*, or performing violent actions within the gameworld as a *perpetrator* of in-game violence. Therefore, in order to establish a foundational, medium-specific framework that describes all the possible meanings of in-game violence, I will forward a theoretical analysis that foregrounds the player as an embodied agent.

The first part of my kinaesthetic-embodied analysis of in-game violence examines violence as a spectacle. It focuses on the player's role as an embodied spectator of in-game violence, highlighting the objective phenomenological relation to the playable figure[3]. Using examples from digital games like *Manhunt* (Rockstar North 2003), I explore how excessive, aestheticized depictions of violence are presented so as to illustrate this dynamic and unpack the allure of violent entertainment. Finally, I offer a functional definition of witnessing in-game violence, underscoring the player's role as a spectator.

The next part of my analysis examines violence as acted out by the player. It focuses on the player's role as an embodied performer of in-game violent acts, highlighting the subjective phenomenological relation to the playable figure. I examine the perpetration of violence as it relates with the competitional aspects of digital games, with a focus on fighting games like *Mortal Kombat* (Midway 1992). In turn, I comment on the possibility of an ethical perpetration of in-game violence, arguing for its "transformative potential" (Nguyen and Zagal 2016). I also address the kinaesthetic pleasures associated with violent in-game performances, which suggest that players may experience positive emotions in relation to violence and may feel a need to express their violent tendencies within the "safe space" of games (Kestenbaum and Weinstein 1985). Finally, I propose a functional definition of perpetrating in-game violence, emphasizing the player's role as a performer.

The final part of my analysis attempts to identify the victims of in-game violence. It focuses on the player's role as either a victim of the game's violence – whether inflicted by in-game entities or actual opponents – or a victimizer of such entities or opponents. It highlights the player's conceptually complex relation to the negative aspects of in-game violence and pinpoints instances where violence might be considered unethical or toxic, particularly in multiplayer game settings, for example

Grand Theft Auto Online (Rockstar North 2013). Finally, I propose a functional definition of receiving in-game violence.

Digital games inhabit a liminal space between the virtuality of their environments and our embodied experience of navigating and perceiving them as lived worlds. The actions we undertake within these games may influence our behavior in the non-mediated reality and such possibility will be explored in its validity. By developing an embodied-kinaesthetic framework, we can gain insights into the diverse meanings of in-game violence, thereby demystifying the notion and proposing a constructive interpretation across various types and genres of gaming, catering to diverse players and contexts.

ENDNOTES
1 In-game violence is used here as a provisional term to denote general phenomena of violence occurring within a digital gaming context. This includes both the experience of witnessing violence as visually represented within the gameworld and the experience of performing violent actions within the game's system.
2 Kinaesthetic engagement refers to the player's involvement with a game system and its world through movement. This engagement is achieved via the player's kinaesthetic effort with a control input apparatus (e.g., controller or keyboard), affording the player to experience a sense of movement within the game.
3 The playable figure is used in accordance with Vella's framing (2015) to denote the entity in a digital game that the player assumes both as an avatar – a game component under the player's direct control – and as a character, the representation of an individual within the game's fictional setting.

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