"I Like the Idea of Killing But Not the Idea of Cruelty": How New Zealand youth negotiate the pleasures of simulated violence

Gareth Schott
University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105, Waikato, New Zealand
g.schott@waikato.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

'For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat … It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not' [19]. The aim of this paper is to account for the experience of a two-year research project, funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand. This project sought to interrogate commonly articulated beliefs concerning the contribution of games to the 'debauched innocence of our young' [2]. Akin to the seemingly incompatible sentiments expressed in the opening quotation, the project broadly acknowledged the *complexity* of players' relationship with violence as it is articulated in interactive digital games. To achieve this the project prioritized the experiences and perspectives of young people on the nature and function of what is commonly understood as 'violent' content within games. Despite forming the readership of popular culture, young people are commonly denied a voice by the very 'authorities and opinion makers' [23] that chastise their practices. This paper highlights how players variously contested the term 'violence' for its *expansive* nature and the appropriateness of the way it is unquestioningly and legitimately employed to express what happens in games.

Author Keywords

'violence', social construction, language games, game players.

Typically the modern research funding system now seeks 'outcomes' over 'outputs', referring to the meaningful impact of research on wider society, or the very segment of the population under investigation. Correspondingly, an exchange of opinions is considered to be an important component of participatory democracy. As this article was being compiled another strand of the projects dissemination strategy was due to be published in a national broadsheet newspaper. The intent behind completing an 'opinion article' was to utilise the very medium that is partly responsible for shaping public values relating to interactive games, in order to provoke some reassessment of long-held assumptions. Yet, as the publication drew nearer, apprehension set in. Despite best intentions, the newspaper interview found the present research interrogated and understood via an established framework comprised of prediction, causality, de-sensitization, as well as the desire to include a reference Grand Theft Auto. While, on the one hand, this research can be characterised as an exercise in highlighting the fragility of a knowledge base that frames game texts solely in terms of their capacity to foster imitation and trigger harmful psychological states. On the other hand, it was equally an endeavour in 'connecting' with adolescent game players over their lasting and fervent engagement with interactive representation of violent encounters.

A persistent problem facing this project has been the manner in which its aims have been negated by a deep-rooted understanding of how 'violence' should function as a research variable. Lyotard's [17] concept of 'language games' provided a useful means of describing how, to date, the seemingly 'linguistic objectivity' of traditional experimental methods has become efficient at 'eliminating' or preventing alternate treatments of 'violence'. As a discourse of legitimation, experimental research has sought to absolve the need for further modes of interrogation. Mary Gergen is one of many who argue that 'there is no sacred language that *must* be used in order to engage in disciplinary work' [12]. Yet, language has consistently served to confine our thinking on, and accounts of, the way games appropriate violence in their themes, imagery and the performances they elicit. Consistent with the broader undertaking of Game Studies early boundary work [6], a key challenge presented to this project arose from a need to acquire a faithful means of articulating an experience of play that embodies conflict. In doing so, it was possible that the truth-value of experimental methodologies may also be called into question for its capacity to *fully* account for the experience of play. Given modernist psychology's inability to achieve any noteworthy impact, in terms of curbing the degree of cultural consumption and the proliferation of gaming, it was considered a favorable time for less orthodox accounts to achieve greater exposure.

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During this project, an exchange of ideas amongst game players was achieved via weekly game clubs that provided both regular access to participants and permitted exploration of a range of game texts. The game clubs also functioned to permit direct and pseudo-longitudinal observations of game play and also effortlessly allowed the initiation of discussions around issues such as preference, motivation, and reception. More structured focus group discussions and individual interviews were also conducted throughout the process. Five schools throughout the Waikato and Bay of Plenty regions of Te Ika-a-Māui (New Zealand's North Island) granted the project access to their students. Typically students were either attracted to the project through recruitment notices advertising the project, or participated as part of their class time for project-related academic subjects (Information Technology or Media Studies). Most of the game clubs were conducted on-site at the schools, with the exception of one school that allowed their students to attend a club on the university campus. Teachers invariably attended the first few sessions but then allowed the research to function autonomously. In total, sixty-one students (53 male and 8 female) participated in the research, which ran for the duration of a full school year.

EMPIRICAL PROPOSITIONS

In an attempt to set aside the taken-for-granted assumptions concerning gaming practices, the project sought to reflect on the normative processes that operate around the applied use of the term violence in discussions of gaming. For example, in a literature review on psychological research evidence to-date, chronicling the impact of 'violent' games, leading researchers Bartlett et al. [1] typically fail to define how they characterize games as 'violence' despite making a distinction between games containing high and low violence. It was felt that little exists by way of an interpretative framework for understanding the appropriation of violence within games. This is contrary to the complex legal mechanisms that exist that determine 'social recognition' of the manner in which blame and responsibility are attributed to perpetrator and victim when understanding an act as 'violent' [20]. The solution resided within Game Studies treatment of games as a fusion of ludic, narrative and representational forces that continually fold, unfold and refold as play is activated [7]. When applied to texts containing 'game violence,' such analytical frameworks that understand games as multimodal texts enabled accounts of play that included the intensities that players experience, involving a complex dynamic between other mediated experiences such as contemporary cinema, the pleasures of game spectacle and special effects, as well as the intensities of the game performance itself that offers many obstacles for the player to overcome.

For young people that opt to engage with texts that contain 'game violence,' there have been few opportunities to articulate their appeal, function and pleasures. In seeking to offer more localized and contextual accounts of player agency, it is however argued that consideration is being given to sustaining social order and the protection of human values, typically perceived as the preserve of game critics. The language conventions pertaining to games are inevitably value-saturated products of social agreement that have largely excluded the player's voice. The subjects (rather than participants) of experimental psychology have been robbed of their voice by its procedures. In turn, the subsequent integration of such perspectives into society has created a discourse that operates as a fulcrum for stasis [8]. While awareness of the disposition of prior research endeavours is one thing, breaking through those epistemological codes and achieving 'dominance-free dialogue' [15] is another.

Initial conclusions from the time spent with the projects' participants confirmed the extent to which their viewpoints were wedded to dominant public discourse surrounding gaming. Despite constituting 'a manifold of changing horizons' [10], game culture is rarely expressed as temporal or emergent within the effects debate. As a result players initially proved to be ill equipped to express the content, nature, and scope of their gaming experiences. In asking players to articulate what constitutes a game experience, we invited the frequent and unqualified use of words such as 'people', 'kill', 'shoot', and 'violence'. This constituted a ritual of exchange that saw players automatically employing the restricted vocabulary made available to them. It was therefore necessary to employ a 'constructionist sensitivity' [11] towards players' custom of seemingly endorsing the narrative authority of their detractors. That is, the possibilities of meaning were framed, and 'subjugated knowledges' revealed [9], by understanding players' comments as structural analyses of the game-as-system together with textual analysis of the codes and signs activated during play.

That said, findings were rarely presented as discrete expressions, but were instead derived from a range of encounters that together possessed a connotative quality. This holds implications for how the project is disseminated, as articles of this nature typically demand verbatim quotes as evidence for what is being argued. This would not be an unreasonable expectation given that the project carries the promise of delivering young peoples' voices. There is not enough space here to devote a meaningful discussion of how theorists and researchers that except a crisis of representation have gone on to negotiate the methodological implications of these beliefs. That said, it was not assumed that research participants 'possess a preformed, pure informational commodity' [13] that could be extracted by simply asking questions and recording answers [5]. This subordinates the interpretive activity of the participants to the substance of what they report. Instead, what are presented as 'findings' often reflect an assemblage of different experiences with the same participants over time that emerged from witnessing their play, paying heed to conversations and our own participation in collaborative

play. Beyond this players took further part in the analytical process when they were invited to evaluate the extent to which our analytical accounts were representative of the issues discussed and considered throughout the research process. Thus, while the remaining sections of this paper may present quotations from participant's discussions, they should not be construed as the only data source associated with the meaning making process outlined here.

Game Clubs

Given the option to nominate games for playing during game clubs, the participants' preferences proved quite unproblematic as they characteristically carried an appropriate R16 classification label or lower. Taste boundaries did not appear to be governed by the classification carried by the game, but remained connected to individual preference and playing experiences. Different games obviously demanded players' attention for different reasons. These included game franchise loyalty, that signaled a more concentrated level of engagement akin to other forms of media fandom (e.g. *Halo*, *Call of Duty*, the *Tom Clancy* stealth series) to convergence culture and the bridge between film and games (e.g. *Transformers*) that were more short-lived due to their association with the lifecycle of other media products. Other selections were determined purely on the grounds of the promise of new technological features and developments rather than possibilities connected with immersive worlds or narrative rationales. An example of this, included the excitement over *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed* (LucasArts) whose Euphoria artificial intelligence software endows NPCs with self-preservation, and the environmental responsiveness of Pixelux's digital molecular matter, that renders surfaces with the appropriate reaction to blasters and lightsabers.

When discussing selection choices, clear 'patterns' were discernable. The most consistently discussed experiences were those that offered possibilities of heroic fortitude connected to a bygone age of warfare. Yet, even within specific and preferred genres such as World War II era campaigns, the paths of pleasure remained varied, intricate and quite often distinct from the anticipation associated with its selection. A good example of this was found in popular choice, *Resistance: Fall of Man* (Insomniac Games), a game that we witnessed imposing itself upon the players. From a rousing call to arms to C.E. Montague's *Disenchantment* [18], players quickly altered their expectation of heroic daring and adapted to battle sequences that offered little time for prolonged strategizing, opportunities to impose themselves or drive the experience.

The array of forces operating upon the player is suggested in the game's publicity material, namely: 'Never underestimate humanity's will to survive.' The key concern for players, as exhibited through game play, prioritized avatar preservation over actions that could be interpreted as anything approaching premeditated malice or cruelty. As one participant stated:

> When you're playing a game its not necessarily like "I'm going to kill this guy" like "because I can." A lot of the time I want to stay alive, so the survival instinct is to kill the guy knowing he's going to kill you. But if you're just watching the game, it's like, "he just killed that guy, why?"

Indeed, Juul was quick to point out that 'games contain a built-in contradiction' [14], referring to the way interactivity is often mistakenly equated with 'free-form' play rather the fixed rule systems that characterize the experience. With only transitory refuge and a gun, the game conditions triggered constant movement and repositioning under threat.

Resistance: Fall of Man can be read as loosely conforming to Rovira's definition of 'violence' as obeying the purpose of maintaining, changing or destroying a given order of things, situations or values [21]. As a fantasy science-fiction game, the game is set in an alternative history that erases the Great Depression, the rise of Nazi Germany, and World War II, yet evokes that historical period and retains the raison d'être of those expunged world conflicts. As one player commented:

> In *Resistance: Fall of Man* they're not humans that you are fighting, they're some type of alien … It's like *War of the Worlds* you just have to save yourself, kill the aliens to save the world, that type of thing

The game swept players up in a brutal struggle for survival against a superior alien race (much like other favorite *Halo 3*), thus forming part of tradition of fictional that can be traced to the literary works of authors such as G.T. Chesney [4], W. Le Queux [16], and H.G. Wells [24] and served to express very real insecurities and anxieties concerning invasion. Players identified with these readings of the text and recognized them in various popular culture texts in which advanced cultures seek to destroy society (e.g. *The Matrix* and *Terminator: The Sarah Conner Chronicles*).

As an aside, players' preference for *Resistance: Fall of Man* also coincided with the Church of England's objection to Sony's recreation of both the exterior and interior of Manchester Cathedral within the game. The current Bishop of Manchester, the Right Reverend Nigel McCulloch, was quoted stating: 'For a global manufacturer to re-create one of our greatest cathedrals with photo-realistic quality and then encourage people to have gun battles in the building is beyond belief and highly irresponsible'. The argument extended to an accusation that Sony were also directly contributing to the city's 'gun crime problem.' Sony's response, inevitably privileged the fictional quota of the game as they argued that they 'do not accept that there is any connection between contemporary issues of 21st century Manchester and a work of science fiction in which a fictitious 1950's Britain is under attack by aliens.'

Media coverage of the debate confounded matters further

with misleading reports, such as the BBC News report which described the game as a 'computerized scene of mass murder' that again included the Bishop of Manchester commenting that: 'for any house of God, to be used as a context for a game about *killing people* is offensive' (emphasis added). Here we find a common source of irritation for a number of the game players consulted and a dominant 'language game' inflicting the perception of games – arguments of determinism coupled with a restricted reading or misinterpretation of the text. Highly public readings of the text were heavily condemned by players for over-emphasizing the relevance of a single facet of the experience (see [22] for a more detailed discussion of other 'language games' identified within the research).

When presented with the active discourses that have an impact upon how games are perceived, players subsequently sought to distinguish themselves more clearly in terms of the depth of their understanding and grasp of how game texts function and provoke thought. Literacy and nuanced appreciation became hallmarks of players' discussions as they attempted to illustrate a deeper awareness of what the medium offers. Thus, institutional objections to *Resistance: Fall of Man* were deemed to have 'missed the point.' Players instead claiming to have interpreted the role of locale and the 'now' immaterial nature of the structure as a sacred site, as signifying the demise of faith and the downfall of civilized society and its values (irrespective of players failure to recognize the space specifically as Manchester Cathedral). This was however coupled with viewpoints that prioritized the flow and generic structure of play; 'it's a church, awesome, a stronghold.'

The scenarios presented by *Resistance: Fall of Man* and other popular games (such as *Halo 3*, *Call of Duty* etc.) were not considered dissimilar from the types of legislated conflicts that frequently obtain 'the consent of the vast majority of the population' [3]. For many players, war-themed games were often perceived as morally defensible, powerful and meaningful. Returning to players' initial desire to embody 'heroism,' avatars were ascribed with a high moral stature, often put into action in defense of rational values and envied for being indefatigable in the face of powerful antagonists.

Consistent with recent cinematic attempts to annul customary Hollywood demonization of enemies, some players also isolated an interest in the 'experience' of war notwithstanding ideology. An attraction to duty, honor and the humanity of the soldier over patriotism was partly attributable to New Zealand youth articulating an anti-American attitude (connected to its unpopularity as super-power status and recent foreign policy). Such beliefs also determined how perceptible it was that they were often being aligned with the just side in war:

> But quite often now games come from two different viewpoints, WWII games play as the Germans or play as Americans. We quite often chose the Germans, because you don't ever get to play from that view … I think gamers are more morally aware than normal people, because they rarely think of things from the other perspective.

The anti-American sentiments touched on above were also evident in a broader rejection of games that evoke urban gang culture. A number of players were quick to distance themselves from popular and contentious texts like *Grand Theft Auto* (IV was released during the project) and *Saints Row*. This appeared to serve two purposes. Firstly, to signify a rejection of the perceived Americanization of sections of New Zealand youth, delineating how different youth sub-cultures are in operation within New Zealand. Secondly, it indicated a desire on the part of some players to present game preferences as more considered, justifiable and harder to encapsulate than media obsession with games like GTA. For example:

> There has to be some goal for it. Like most games you have to kill those people to get over there but then you have games like *Postal* where it's just kill that person if you want. Just hit them with a spade, but that doesn't hold a lot of attraction because its just killing people for the hell of it.

> Doing analytical studies based on one game is a pitiful amount of evidence. Yes GTA has pointless violence but the point is, you're summing up the whole entire gamers, gaming part of society, based on one game.

Failure to endorse such games was also expressed as a distinction between; 'violence and then there's cruelty, which I believe are two different things … I try to avoid cruel games.' The same participant stating that: 'I don't like the idea of, you know, torture, rape, pillage, you know the whole … I like the idea of killing but not the idea of cruelty, like in a cruel manner.' Such comments might be emphasized for the seemingly nonchalant use of 'killing'. Yet, observations such as these were only offered by participants over time, once commitment had been given to exploring and accepting players views on the disparity between the representational and simulated violence of games and the nature and impact of violence in the lived world. Participants became more comfortable using such terms, in the knowledge that such remarks would not be misconstrued as possessing any predictive qualities, beyond its application in articulation of the pleasures associated with the conflict embedded in game systems that communicate morally permissible narratives.

The notion of getting caught up in the hype of a contentious yet fashionable game was however

presented as an inevitable but immature phase in a game player's development. Instead, game features like sandbox play was rejected in favor of choice indicative of skill, mastery and a fitting reading of the text:

> I like *Rainbow Six Vegas* because there's usually like six entries into a room. You can choose whichever one you want, you know. There might be hostages in a room so you have to take a certain door to not shoot the hostages, you know.

> I played a game, it was *Marines: First to fight* [*Close Combat: First to fight*], you had a choice, you had a stealthy entry, your people would pick the lock and move in slowly, or you have forced entry where they kick down the door, throw in a grenade and charge it, so that kind of thing, I love that kind of options.

Beyond commenting on the ludic qualities of game texts cited as contributors to school-based shootings in the US (overlooking Europe), participants also employed cultural stereotypes in rejection of the persuasive qualities of games. Several common responses were recorded during focus group discussions in which participants viewed US news coverage surrounding the Virginia Tech shootings as well as media debates concerning the role of games (often featuring high profile critics such as Jack Thompson). Namely, this included the response of 'America as a violent culture' with greater access to firearms,

> Maybe they'd know how to fire a gun, but they would anyway, they're American

> If kids can take guns to school, surely that's a society issue. Where are they getting the guns from in the first place?

The other immediate reaction included the absolute rejection of the training qualities of games, for example:

> Pointing a mouse is not the same as firing a gun

> It doesn't show you how physically it is done, you just click R and it reloads the gun for you

> Most people would be at a loss if you gave then a gun and said reload that

> You might think there is some validity in the argument that the army trains with them, but the army doesn't just use videogames, it puts guns in peoples hands and asks them to run around practicing killing people

On the whole, discussions throughout the project were rarely rowdy, boisterous or characterized by bravado pertaining to claims of completing exaggerated or extreme acts of 'game violence'. While it would be safe to assume that participants were exercising a certain level of restraint, given their knowledge of the research project, such sustained impression management for the duration of the data collection period (in the presence of peers and friendship networks) suggested otherwise. As adolescents some of the younger group compositions did however occasionally descend into childish humor and bickering. A decision was however made to allow such debates/encounters to run their course, rather than intervene and steer discussions in a way that was more preferable to the demands of a research project. Such instances served as useful reminders of how the participants' were also negotiating a developmental period that finds them wavering between societal constructs of childhood and adulthood.

CONCLUSION

Public perception of game players as 'unintelligible' with regard to their practices, could indeed be attributable to the language that players have at their disposal to discuss their experiences. Yet, in working with players to develop more personal, contextual and textual accounts of game playing this research was instead able to highlight the richness of players' tastes in terms of what they were capable of taking from their experiences with game texts. This paper sought to outline how a key outcome of this research project was the 'process' (that is ongoing) of employing Game Studies theory in order to 'free' players from exercising the ritualised discourse suggestive of an attachment to games founded on a fascination with the damaging effects of physical violence and bodily harm. Rather than derive 'obdurate truths' about the causal networks in which 'violence' is embedded, the experience of this project has deemed such methods impersonal, prohibiting the inclusion of ideology, values and passions in our accounts of games [10]. This work may be dismissed as failing to adhere to the progressive nature of research. However, given that the primary outcome of most scholarly inquiry is discourse, it is argued that this project has begun a process of propagating the construction of alternative perspectives, producing symbolic resources that might go on to contribute to cultural life - A condition that has been lacking in the pretences of the past.

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