

As the Boundaries Blur Between Games and Reality

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Introduction

Students who take our first-year writing studies courses are often surprised to learn that using first-person narratives in argumentative essays can be effective in some contexts. In WRS 104 Writing Persuasive Arguments, we explored the possibilities of this technique. As a science student who didn't have much experience writing personal narratives, Chenoa Kaufman pushed herself to integrate her own experiences playing video games into an essay. The result of Chenoa's experimentation with narrative was this very compelling essay on how violence in video games might affect us in the real world.

Keywords: argumentative essay, first-person shooter, narrative argument, video games, violence



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During my last few years of high school, I spent a good portion of my time being in love with the first-person shooter *Overwatch: Legendary Edition*. I played it at home, I played it competitively at school with my eSports team, and it became something that I loved. Although I was somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of shooting other players, I remained confident in my ability to isolate the game from the real world, especially because *Overwatch: Legendary Edition* is one of the tamer varieties of first-person shooters available, and the characters are clearly fictional. However, as I was out walking one day, I noticed a couple of birds on a power line. At that moment, perhaps I was thinking about how my eSports team needed to improve if we wanted to be competitive, or maybe I was thinking about my score in the game, but it took me a few moments to register that the crosshairs of the sniper character had appeared in my vision. I was evaluating the probability of getting a ‘critical hit,’ a headshot, on the birds, which would reward me with additional points in the game. Without any conscious thought, I brought the violence of *Overwatch: Legendary Edition* into the real world. The boundaries that I had worked so hard to establish were unintentionally broken, leaving me shocked and a little scared once I realized what I was doing.

Just how acclimated to the killing in first-person shooter games have I, and perhaps other gamers, become? When did my ‘gaming’ morals, where shooting someone is acceptable, intertwine with my ‘real life’ morals? Current research into these questions, as well as the general effects of violent video games, is undoubtedly complex and often contradictory. However, the literature does primarily agree that violent video games cause both desensitization and moral disengagement in players. Both phenomena have been discussed as potential causes for undesirable behaviour or thinking in the real world, which therefore illustrates a need to critically consider the content we experience through violent video games and what effects it may be having, and a need to decide what role this content should play in our lives. Through careful self-reflection, discussion, and further research, I believe we will be able to better identify and understand how we are being impacted and how we can respond to potential changes in thinking or behaviour caused by violent video games, allowing us to enjoy these games without unintended or unexpected real-world consequences.

Desensitization in the context of violent video games can be defined as “a reduction in emotion-related physiological reactivity to real violence” (Carnagey et al. 490). I define violence in video games as in-game actions or events that are not considered ethical in real life. Although *Overwatch: Legendary Edition* is limited to essentially killing and being killed, other games extend into crime, sexual assault, or worse offences. In my experience, these actions typically are an integral part of the games, and just as surgeons and soldiers

eventually learn to complete their jobs despite being surrounded by potentially triggering environments (Carnagey et al. 490), it is logical to conclude that our brains will become desensitized to this violent content. To the typical individual, this desensitization serves little purpose other than to improve one's skill at the game, and as a result, we must be watchful of how desensitized we are becoming to video game content and how this affects our response to real violence. The need for this is illustrated firstly through my personal experience of having little to no response towards imagining shooting birds, but also through professional studies that have been conducted. Carnagey et al. described that the individuals who played a violent video game produced a decreased physiological response when shown real violence (495), and Bushman and Anderson demonstrated that subjects who played violent video games took longer to provide help to a fight that was staged just outside the testing room (277). These data are significant because they illustrate not only that violent video games are likely connected to desensitization but also that becoming desensitized can alter our ideas of compassion and empathy as well as our perception of violence.

Moral disengagement in the context of violent video games can be defined as when we “sidestep our internalized moral standards and behave immorally without feeling attendant distress” (Moore 199). Beyond acclimating to the actions in violent video games, we must consider why the unethical activities in violent video games are perceived as not only acceptable but also as fun and exciting. Hartmann and Vorderer describe that “the overall enjoyment of virtual violence in games may depend on maximizing pleasurable gratifications and minimizing aversive costs” (97). This is effectively achieved through moral disengagement (Hartmann and Vorderer 98) because, by relaxing our ideas of morality, we can enjoy the immoral actions in video games that would otherwise cause guilt. The risk associated with this behaviour that we must consider is that the application of moral disengagement in video games appears to promote it in the real world (Gabbiadini et al. 1405). Although Gabbiadini et al. emphasize that further research is required to determine if a causal link is present, the result of their study suggests that recent and frequent exposure to violent video games may allow moral disengagement, which we use to justify immoral behaviour, to become easier in real life the more we practice it in gaming (1405). This prospect has interesting implications for the justification of our real-world actions: permitting the unconscious breakdown of moral barriers that prevent us from performing unethical actions in real life and framing engagement in violence as less of a decision and more of an impulse. Further research on the link between violent video games and moral disengagement is required, but this idea is one we must consider if we are to determine the impact of video games on ourselves and our thinking.

With desensitization and moral disengagement in mind, it is necessary to reinforce not only the significant demonstrated benefits of video games but also that the solution to understanding video games is certainly not to isolate ourselves or those we are responsible for from violent content. For instance, experience with violent video games has been shown to cause “increased visuospatial cognition” (Ferguson 314), and participating in these games provides access to violence generally, which esteemed author Ray Bradbury claims is essential: “...our arts must help us to free the violence that is in our soul...if our movies and our televisions don’t have a certain amount of [violence] we will become a society bound *completely* by laws so that the anarchy that rages within us on occasion will burst out and be ten times worse” (Bradbury). Although Bradbury was speaking about the violence in television at a time when video games were sparingly available, video games can fulfill the purpose that Bradbury is discussing in this modern world. This benefit makes them an important part of our lifestyles and culture and supports the idea that we should not feel guilty or shameful for enjoying violent video games or being affected by them. In their discussion of moral disengagement, Hartmann and Vorderer emphasize that “it is not due to dysfunctional personality traits that players enjoy virtual violence. Rather, the games create a situation that automatically leads to cognitive disengagement from inner moral standards” (98). In other words, the main adverse effects of video games happen unconsciously. While we enjoy our video games, it is necessary to realize that video games induce cognitive and moral disengagement and that these changes occur silently. We must understand how these two phenomena operate if we are going to recognize and recover from their effects.

Just daydreaming about shooting birds on a power line may be harmless, but we must understand the mechanisms behind thoughts like these as well as how and why they arise. We, as retired, current, or prospective players, can act by reflecting upon how violent video games may be affecting us, as well as by engaging in discussion with one another and, especially younger players, to promote a healthy understanding of the role violent content plays in our lives. This could take the form of discussions held at eSports clubs, especially for youth teams, or perhaps by integrating discussions about video games into school curriculums. Information regarding desensitization and moral disengagement could also be made more readily available online, and we could increase access to professional support for those struggling with interpreting the effects of violent video games. Our understanding of desensitization and moral disengagement would also benefit from further research into the effects of these issues as well as discovering solutions to counteract them. Overall, we can work together to allow the violence in the video games we love to coexist with the morality and compassion we must demonstrate in the real world by understanding what happens as the lines between video games and life blur. This work will require the humility to recognize that we may be affected by violent content, as well as the patience to hold candid, realistic, and open conversations within ourselves and with each other. Although admitting weakness

is perhaps the most intimidating step of this process, it is essential to reap the benefits of better understanding the legitimate threats desensitization and moral disengagement pose. Personal reflection is the first step of this process, and it is the step every gamer must be willing to carry out so we may begin to engage in the discussions and research that will bring about true understanding.

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