Fittingly Violent[1]

Narrative Properties of Violence in Digital Games

Frank G. Bosman

Keywords: *ethical gameplay; ludo-narrative dissonance; morality; morality system; violence*

In the game *Half-Life 2* (Valve 2006), the player controls silent protagonist Gordon Freeman, who is tasked to fight the alien Combine invasion terrorizing Earth. Together with his iconic crowbar, Freeman starts to shoot and kill alien soldiers and wildlife, the latter especially in the form of 'headcrabs', turning their human victims in still conscious but powerless shells of their former selves. Amidst the depression of the occupation of Earth, Freeman's former boss, the scientist Wallace Breen, had stepped into position to rule the planet in the name of his alien overlords. Breen is convinced the Combine-initiated process of 'adaption' will provide not only the only possible change of humankind's survival, but also marks the beginning of her next evolutionary step. In practice however, the Combine 'synthesize' the races they invade with their own DNA, resulting in rather horrifying creatures that mindlessly obey their overlords' commands.

On first sight, Freeman's mission seems to be a moral justifiable one: he involuntarily starts a revolutionary movement, that tries to free Earth from the Combine's grasp. But in the course of his attempts to overthrow the aliens, Freeman leaves a trail of death and destruction in his wake, not unlike in the vast majority of videogames. Even though one could argue that Freeman is acting out of personal preservation, since the Combine actively hunts him, or to serve the greater good of collective freedom for humankind, or even that the majority of synthesized enemies are literally beyond redemption, it is Wallace Breen quite ironically, who questions the hero's moral judgement.

During a public broadcast, he addresses Freeman directly:

> Tell me, Dr. Freeman, if you can: you have destroyed so much, what is it exactly that you have created? Can you name even one thing? I thought not.

1 By mentioning the female [male] function designation in this chapter, always both forms are meant if not indicated differently.

On at least one level, Breen's objection to Freeman's actions is understandable and maybe even morally justifiable: he has done literary nothing else than killing people and destroying objects. Freeman has not, indeed, constructed anything during the game's duration. *Half-Life* is not the only game addressing the theme of violence, its moral justifiability, and its societal benefice, nor the most vocal one on the international game market. Games series like *Fallout* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008; 2015), *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007; 2020; 2012), and *Metro* (4A Games 2010; 2013; 2019) feature a morality system judging the player's in-game behaviour against a pre-determined ethical framework (Bosman 2019; Knoll 2018). Other games, like the *Borderlands* (Gearbox Software 2009; 2012; 2014; 2019) or the *Serious Sam* (Croteam 2002; 2005; 2011; 2020) series, ignore all moral questions and present a playful, version of reality, including an abundancy of consequence-free violence.

The whole subject of videogame violence is heavily debated, by both game scholars and game critics alike (cf. Anderson et al. 2007; Gimpel 2013; Gunter 2016). Some games were even (temporarily) banned or discontinued because of their graphic depiction of violence or its (supposed) glorification of crimes. Famous examples are *Rape Day* ([anonymous] 2019), in which the player has to plan and execute the rape on a mother and her two daughters (Wales 2019); *Pakistan Army Retribution* (Punjab Information Technology Board 2014) based on 2014 Peshawar school massacre in Pakistan (Rahool 2016); and *Hatred* (Destructive Creations 2015), playing as a misanthropic mass-killer on a genocidal crusade to kill as humans as possible (Matulef 2014).

However, understanding games as "digital texts" (Bosman 2019: 37–56) and using a communication-oriented method of text analysis (Van Wieringen 2020), I differentiate between three possible starting points of discussing violence and videogames. (1) One could discuss violence and digital games from the point of the 'real author', that is, from the perspective of the game creators and game publishers. What is their moral responsibility in all of this? How does the gaming industry try to shield minors from excessive violence? Do disclaimers and classification systems function as intended?

(2) The second perspective on violence and games is that of the 'real readers' of specific games, that is, individual gamers and their experiences while playing. What are the real-life influences of in-game violence on individual players and their psychological well-being? (3) The third perspective is that of the text-immanent author-reader, meaning, the role of violence on the décor of the game's narrative. What are the narrative properties of violence in videogames' narratives? And how is the text-immanent player positioned within and towards the in-game violence and he/she participation in the execution of that violence?

The first two perspectives are text-external, while the third one is strictly text-immanent. This third perspective is the one I will be using in this article. By inventorying the possible narrative properties of violence in videogames, it will be possible – as I will demonstrate – to fuel a more inclusive approach to the general discussion on violence and games. This is even more true since videogames as a genre – and their necessary interactive nature – harbour a unique communicative property (Bosman/Van Wieringen 2021). Games are the only communication medium allowing a text-immanent reader/player to 'merge' with the character of the in-game protagonist (the player's

avatar), charging the immanent-reader with the responsibility to relate himself towards the violence he himself is executing.

In this article, I will argue that violence has five distinct narrative properties within games' narratives: (1) motivation for the game's protagonist, (2) trivialization of violence, (3) dehumanization of the victims, (4) moralization of violence as an ethical option, and (5) problematization of violence. Of all five types, I will discuss different case studies, nknown on the role of the text-immanent player within the game's narrative. Because of the unique communication properties of games, I will focus on the position of and consequences for the text-immanent player.

Motivation

The first narrative property of violence in digital games is providing a motivation for the game's protagonist, and therefore the text-immanent reader/player, to come into action, usually in the form of violence against the hero him/herself or a greater group the hero is emotionally attached to (Bosman 2021). At the beginning of their adventures, heroes (to be) are frequently confronted with abducted, maltreated, or murdered relatives or friends, and even the decimation or right-out destruction of their family, gang, town, tribe or people by one or more villains who serve as the main antagonists for the duration of the game's narrative.

A couple of examples will suffice. Especially the Canada-produced *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft Montreal 2007–2017; Ubisoft Quebec 2015; 2018) is an illustrative one. In more than one instalment, the prime motivation for the game's protagonist is the murder of a loved one. In *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft Montreal 2009), young Ezio Auditore's father and two of his brothers are hanged for a crime they didn't commit; in *Assassin's Creed III* (Ubisoft Montreal 2012), the young native American Ratonhnhaké:ton witnesses the ransacking of his village by apparently British troops; in *Assassin's Creed Unity* (Ubisoft Montreal 2014), Arno is confronted by the murder on both his biological and adoptive father; in *Assassin's Creed Origins* (Ubisoft Montreal 2017) the proto-assassin Bayek isnknowned by the cruel murder on his young son; and in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec 2018), the young Persian protagonist is thrown from a mountain by his/her own father because of an oracle's prophecy. Other examples include *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games 2017), in which the young Aloy witnesses the murder on her foster-father Rost; *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2019), in which Porter Sam is forced to travel westwards to rescue her kidnapped sister; and *Metro Exodus* (4A Games 2012), in which Artyom is – partly – motivated by his urge to find a cure for his poisoned wife, Anna.

These circumstances provide a morally justifiable and emotionally understandable context in which the violence the hero utilizes in realizing his revenge is more or less pacified. The hero does not start the circle of death and destruction, but reacts to it, trying to end it eventually, but only on his own terms. The hero is not the perpetrator, but the victim of the violence even if his use of deadly force outweighs – qualitatively and/or qualitatively – that of the original happenings. Because the other started the violence, the hero is freed of any moral obligation to contemplate his/her actions.

This leads, sometimes, to a rather confusing ludo-narrative dissonance (Hocking 2007; Toh 2019) in which the game's story tells the text-immanent to do one thing, while the game's mechanics teach him to do quite the opposite. Again, the *Assassin's Creed* series provide a clear example. The Assassin Order, based on the historical Islamic sect of the Nizari Isma'ilites (Bosman 2016), operates through a creed, which states, among other things, to "stay your blade from the flesh of an innocent" (Ubisoft Montreal 2007: n.p.). The game series' narrative really tries to drive the point home that the Assassins only target high-profile individuals whose wickedness is beyond a shadow of a doubt, but to reach these targets it is quite necessary or at least unavoidable to kill a host of lesser enemies, the majority of which have no moral connection to their evil overlords (Sab 2014). Another example is (the reboot of the game) *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013): in the cut scenes of this game, a young Lara Croft struggles to kill an animal for food or with "the fact that she's had to kill a man to defend herself" (Amendola 2016: n.p.), while during the actual gameplay Lara does not seem to have any problems with those two things.

What applies to the in-game protagonist, **mutatis mutandis**, also applies to the text-immanent reader of the game. The player is given a motive for his own involvement in the hero's violent actions against humankind. Even if some of the 'heroic' violence is done in cut scenes, out of reach of the player's control, the entanglement of the player's avatar and the payer himself is not broken. From a communication point of view, both instances still coincide, even when control is temporarily lifted. Because of this entanglement, the motivation of the game's player for the use of deadly (in-game) violence is the same as for the player's avatar. Of course, individual players can have other motivations to play a game – curiousness, boredom, the need for a challenge, etcetera – but the text-immanent player necessarily has the same as his in-game character.

Ultimately, games like *Assassin's Creed*, *Metro Exodus* or *Death Stranding* communicate that – within the right context – violence is perfectly justifiable, that is, as retaliation on earlier experienced violence. The victim becomes the offender by turning the latter into a new victim. The text-immanent player is presented with an in-game motivation: violence bringeth violence. But the morality of this metanarrative only holds for those who end up winning the conflict. It's a gaming variant of **Quod licet Iovi, no licet bovi** ("What Jupiter is allowed, a cow is not") in which the gamer is contextualized as the in-game God, whose decisions are morally just and right exactly because he is in that position. Other games challenge this mechanism, as will be discussed later on in this article.

Trivialization

The second narrative property of in-game violence is that of trivialization. Its paradigm is simple: violence is just a lot of fun. The violence **towards** the player's character is portrayed as a consequent-free event, only slowing their progression through the game, while the violence done **by** the player's avatar is presented equally carefree. It is, in other words, a power fantasy. The game's protagonist is never confronted with the lives of his victims, nor their family or loved ones who mourn over the death of their beloved. This property borders on that of alienation (see next section below), but distinguishes itself by

producing a type of in-game enemy that is not particular gruesome, horrible, or unlikeable, but rather forgettable, interchangeable ones. The hero's adversaries are objectified and reduced to one purpose only: to be slain by the player's avatar.

Games and series like *Serious Sam* (Croteam 2002; 2005; 2011; 2020), *Borderlands* (Gearbox Software 2009; 2012; 2014; 2019), *Grand Auto Theft* (DMA Design 1997; 1999; 2001; Rockstar North 2002; 2004; 2008; 2013), and *Bulletstorm* (People Can Fly/Epic Games 2011) portray casual, cartoonish, over-the-top violence, including gruesome executions, exploding bodies, flying body parts, and funny accompanying commentaries by either the dying or the game's protagonist. In *Serious Sam. First* (2001) and *Second Encounter* (2002), the title hero comments things like "Yeah, it's all fun and games until somebody loses an eye" (after his first killing of a Gnaar, a huge on-eyed monster), "Die when I kill you" or "goooood morniiiiing Babylooooon" (n.p.) (a reference to Levinson's 1987 film *Good Morning, Vietnam*). And the *Grand Theft Auto* series alone has a wide range of controversies tied to its name: *GTA IV* (2008) got the stigma of a 'murder' simulator' (Jackson 2008) because of the ability to drive while being drunk, killing many pedestrians, and *GTA V*'s (2013) notorious mission By the Book featured a scene in which the player had to torture someone by means of waterboarding, beating him with a wrench, apply electric shocks from a car battery, or extracting a tooth using pliers (Panic-Cidic 2019: 43–44).

In the broader discussion about the aesthetics and poetics of fictional violence in novels and films (Symonds 2008; Sheehan 2013; Appelbaum 2013), one argument frequently heard: it is **only** a story, it is not the real thing. Viewers can enjoy films like *American Psycho* (Harron 2000), *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick 1971), or *Django Unchained* (Tarantino 2012) only because it is fictional: in real life they would – very probably – never cope with such acts of violence against themselves or anybody else for that matter. In videogames, things are much more complicated due to its genre-specific characteristics. In novels and films, violence by and to the story's protagonist is witnessed by the text-immanent reader, who is – principally – unable to intervene: he is necessary passive. In digital games, however, the violence done to or by the game's protagonist also applies to the gamer himself. If Sam is enjoying his killing spree in *Serious Sam*, or if Trevor is indulging himself in torturing, it is the player who executes both ordeals, and who shares their visible and audible enjoyment. Of course, a real reader/player of the game could be horrified by the in-game violence and his/her active role in it (and even decide to quite the game), but that luxury is not for the immanent-reader.

The trivialization of (in-game) violence can also be linked to the 'inconsequentialness' of violence and death to the text-immanent player (Bosman 2018). Since games left the arcades and its focus on tricking the player to spend as much money as possible on new tries (by ramping up the difficulty spike and allowing the player a very limited set of retries), the vast majority of games allow the player to die and respawn endlessly at no or very low costs (loss of some money, progress, or experience). Even though the majority of games refrain from giving any 'logical' explanation for this capacity, some of them construct a narrative embedding of this ludic mechanic.

Prince of Persia (Ubisoft Montreal 2008) and *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013) provide the protagonist with a last-minute human aid, while *Assassin's Creed* utilizes an in-game virtual reality machine, called the Animus. Even though, the game industry recently adopted somewhat of a fancy for the inclusion of a permadeath option (Bartle 2016:

88), essentially meaning that one death forces the player to re-start the game from the very beginning, the – usually violent – death of the player character has lost any meaning, except that of a ludic feedback mechanism. And because the player's in-game death has lost its real-life, highly serious quality, the death of the antagonists have too.

Dehumanization

A third property of violence in digital games is that of alienation. While studies seem to suggest that real players experience diminishes perceptions of their human qualities and are seemingly prone to do the same with both their in-game enemies and real-life adversaries (Brock et al. 2011; Greitemeyer/McLatchie 2011; Markman 2011), the game protagonist's enemies are usually also constructed in such a way that they are devoid of any human relatability (Burgun 2015), making them ideal targets for the game's protagonist.

Many games feature such dehumanized adversaries. In the *Doom* series (id Software 1993; 1994; 2004; 2016; 2020; Midway Studios San Diego 1997; TeamTNT 1996), they are – quite literally – demons from hell. In *Control* (Remedy Entertainment 2019), the enemies are alien lifeforms from another dimension, who invaded ours by taking over humans. In the *Wolfenstein* series (id Software 1992; Raven Software 2009; Gray Matter Interactive 2001; MachineGames 2014; 2015; 2017; 2019), B.J. Blazkowicz is up against Nazi's or genetically altered and/or diabolically powered 'Übersoldaten'. In the *Half-Life* universe Gordon Freeman mows down hordes of de-humanized creatures, either the Combine-synthesized humans or post-human zombies beyond any hope of recovering.

Russians (Valerino/Habel 2016) and Arabs (Šisler 2008) have also played the role of stereotypical bad guys, whose deeper psychological complexity is utterly neglected. There is an infamous mission, called 'No Russian' in *Call of Duty. Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009), in which the player can participate in a mass shooting at a Russian airport. The mission leads to considerable international protest and disgust (Horiuchi 2009). Especially war simulations like *CoD* but also *Battlefield 3* (DICE 2005) and *Medal of Honor* (DreamWorks Interactive 1999) excessively use Muslim and Arab stereotypes as 'cheap' enemy types (Mirrlees/Ibaid 2021).

The dehumanization of the other – may it be aliens, Nazis or Arabs – allow the player to postpone or even side-track any moral objections involved in the created mayhem. If it is not human you aim for, no morality is involved. Even further, if the player's in-game enemies are de-human, or maybe even in-human, the ending of their existence is not immoral or even amoral, but an ethically praiseworthy action. The text-immanent player is charged with the communication by the in-game author to judge his violent actions as a moral obligation: freeing the (game) world of Nazi scum or Russian terrorists makes it a better place.

In *Half-Life 2*, there is a very famous mission called 'Ravenholm', named after the eerie town by the same name. Gordon Freeman has been warned upfront by his fellow resistance members: "We don't go to Ravenholm anymore"(Valve 2006: n.p.). The reason for this ominous description become clear very soon after entering the city: the Combine have launched a massive amount of 'headcrabs' unto the city by means of special rockets. These headcrabs position themselves on the head of their human victim, taking full

control over all movements. The game heavily suggests that these 'zombies' do maintain all their intellectual and emotional capacities but are deprived of expressing them in any way. When on the brink of death, usually because Gordon has set them on fire – the level is designed specifically to use environmental means of disposing your enemies, they appear to regain control over their bodies again, screaming on the top of their lungs: "I am burning. Please God, kill me. I am burning"(ibid: n.p.).

During the mission, Gordon comes across a strange ally, Father Grigori: a bald, ring-bearded priest of some sorts, who took upon himself the task of "tending to his flock" (ibid: n.p.). In his laboratory, Gordon discovers mutilated human corpses, apparently the remnants of Grigori's utterly failed attempts to separate victimized human from its headcrab. Grigori only knows only one cure left: to quickly end their suffering by shooting them in the head with his signature shotgun. During this 'service' he can be overheard saying things like:

> I remember your true face! – The grave holds nothing worse! – Balm for your affliction, child! – I think nothing less of thee! – Rest, my child! – Come to the light! – It is not me that you want, it is the light that shines through me! – Yes, my children, it is I! – Come my children! It is not me that you seek it is the light that I bring! (ibid: n.p.)

The unique situation of the Ravenholm residents constructs an interesting moral conundrum for the player, even though the game does not allow for any decision-making by the player: you must shoot the zombies if you want to reach the end of the level. But the horrible sounds of the dying zombies, the slowly unraveled background of the headcrab invasion, and the paradoxical tenderness with which Grigori tends to his flock, produce the equally paradoxical juxtaposition of the zombies as both dehumanized and successively re-humanized. Even more pointy, the re-humanization is only procured when they are killed, which is precisely the result of the stripping of their human identity and respectfulness.

Moralization

In the cases of motivation, trivialization, and dehumanization, the violence performed by the protagonist/player is deemed unproblematic by the game's narratives. The case of *Half-Life 2*'s Ravenholm level, however, already indicated that a more intrinsic in-game reflection on the adoption of violence as a self-explanatory and morally unambiguous means to a purpose is very well possible. Games have tried to do so by two related but differentiated means: moralization and problematization of game protagonist's violence.

Moralization of in-game violence occurs when the game presents the player with at least two options to pass a challenge, enabling him to choose between a violent or peaceful solution. The *Assassin's Creed* series is a good example of this. Usually, the player of an instalment of the series is able to tackle a problem – entering a building, stealing an artefact, escaping from captivity – resorting to straight-on violence or silently bypassing all resistance without being detected. Even though some missions dictate that the

player should finish the stealthy, the majority of instances the game allows for both options without favouring one. Killing innocent bystanders will cause 'desynchronisation', forcing the player to restart the mission, but executing enemies will – usually – not. The distinction between innocent civilians and enemies, however, is just as often depending on ludic than on narrative circumstances.

Some games want to emphasize their negotiation of morality. The most common way through which such is happening, is by the use of a morality system (Bosman 2019). In short, videogame morality systems can be defined as implicit or explicit digital systems within a particular game that morally rate certain player actions and/or choices on the basis of a presupposed ethical framework. Games featuring such a system are *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008), and *Bioshock* (2K Boston 2007), and the *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007; 2010; 2012), *Metro* (4A Games 2010; 2013; 2019), and *Fable* series (Big Blue Box Studios 2004; Lionhead Studios 2008; 2010). Some of these systems are explicit – the game communicates to the text-immanent player that his behaviour is monitored and morally judged, leading – probably – to short and/or long-term consequences in terms of ludic and narrative elements in the game; other systems are implicit and leave the player in the dark about its own existence until – usually – very late in the game.

While morality systems are a well-established game mechanic, they have come under criticism (Knoll 2014; Nguyen 2016; Svelch 2010; Zagal 2009). These critics focus on the two-dimensional (dualistic) nature of the systems, their selective morality, the inconsistency of the rule systems, and – again – the danger of a ludo-narrative dissonance. As Sicart (2013) has mentioned, the problem with many morality systems (especially the explicit ones) is that the gameplay actually encourages ludo-strategic behaviour in gamers instead of the required narratological-ethical behaviour (Knoll 2014). This means that players are more inclined to look for the biggest advantage in terms of gameplay and to disregard the morally charged game narrative.

A good example of the difficulty of using such a system is the *Dishonored* series (Arkane Studios 2012; 2016), especially the first two instalments. Both games feature an implicit morality system, called the 'chaos system', that monitors specific actions of the player. In *Dishonored*, the player controls a royal bodyguard-turned-escaped-convict Corvo. Corvo can increase the chaos in the game world by killing assassination targets and other human beings, getting spotted by an enemy or alarmed civilian, letting alarms be rung, bodies to be discovered, or execute certain side objectives. Doing the opposite reduces the chaos. If the city is on high chaos, the difficulty ramps up (ludic), while the overall tone of the narrative darkens (narrative). When on low chaos, the game retains a relative easiness in play. The chaos amount influences the endings of the games too in significant ways.

However, *Dishonored* seems to feature an ethical system in which assassination is placed as the worst crime of all; and all other less bad or worrying. Even if your victims are of a specific nasty kind, assassinating them always results in an increase in chaos, while disposing of them otherwise, will decrease chaos. In every case, an alternative method of disposing of the antagonist is indeed very well possible. For example, Corvo can just kill Thaddeus Campbell, the high Overseer, or mark his face with the so-called Heretic's Brand, making him an outcast of the system he himself upheld for so long. To dispose of Lady Boyle, Corvo can kill her during a party in her mansion, but it is also possible

to kidnap her and deliver her into the hands of Lord Brisby, who has clearly all kinds of perverse and sadistic intentions towards the lady. And to get rid of master inventor Kirin Jindosh, Corvo can – again – kill him merciless, but can also subject him to intense electrotherapy, depriving him of his former genius. Arguably, these 'non-lethal alternatives' are morally equally bad or maybe even worse than outright murder. Again, a ludo-narrative dissonance is lurking in the back.

Another, more subtle version of a(n implicit) morality system is found in the *Metro* series. The player receives or loses morality points by a number of 'innocent' actions, like talking to the people in line before the hospital, giving alms to poor people, retrieving a child's teddy bear, let enemies live after they surrendered, or freeing captive prisoners. The player is not communicated that and when his actions are morally judged, but for two vague and faint sound effects: the breeze of a wind through a tunnel (losing points) or the dripping of water in a cave (gaining points). The endings of all three instalments of the series are influenced by this implicit system, resulting in a more or less desirable conclusion of the stories.

In all these cases, the game burdens the player with the choice how to cope with the possible (more or less violent) scenarios. The text-immanent author of the game offers the player two or more options to continue the story, positioning the text-immanent player even more strongly as an entity within the game's narrative. Of course, the playing of a game involves a practically uncountable amount of choice from the part of the immanent-player (almost exclusively ludic in nature), but when presented with an implicit or explicit morality system, the game's story gears into a narrative hyper-focus. It forces the player to make a concise and deliberate choice how to further the story, and to do so within the context of the character-building process of the player's avatar, that emerged from a continuous identification and entanglement between the player and the game's protagonist.

In the cases of motivation, trivialization, and dehumanization, the in-game violence is postulated by the game's immanent author, leaving the player-avatar no choice but to participate in the violence as it is dictated by the author. Of course, real players can choice to refuse to participate by leaving the game itself. However, the text-immanent player cannot do so. In the case of games involving morality systems, the agency is placed explicitly into the hands of the immanent player. Violence is localized in the moral agency of the player, and so is the moral responsibility of resorting to violence, or to refrain from it.

There are games that transport the possibility of a real player to quite the game and thus refraining from executing violence within the game's world to the level of the immanent player by incorporating a non-interference option. In *Far Cry 4* (Ubisoft Montreal 2014), when game's protagonist Ajay Ghale meets dictator Pagan Min, the latter asks the player to wait in his dining room. When waiting for thirty minutes, thus not engaging the possibility to go and wander around the palace and effectually starting the game's further narrative, Pagan Min re-enters and gives Ajah what he wants. The game will end by rolling the credits, skipped more than 99% of its content. The same is possible at the beginning of *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft Montreal 2018), when the nameless deputy/avatar can refrain from arresting sect leader Joseph Seed, ending the game quickly and very peacefully in comparison with playing through the game as intended.

Some scholars suggest this agency positions the immanent player not only as a character in the décor of the game's narrative, but also on the position of the immanent author himself (Adams 2013). The argument is that the player choices how the story unfolds, thus taking the creative power usually strictly reserved to the author of a story (Lopes 2010; Tavinor 2009). I disagree, however, since the authorial power given to the game-immanent player is always and principally limited by those options provided by the author to the gamer. If a player wants to fly, but the game does not enable the player to do so, he cannot fly. If a player wants to choose a theoretical third option in a given dualistic morale conundrum, he can only choice from the two offered to him by the author.

Problematization

A fifth and final property of violence in videogames is problematization. These games don't offer the text-immanent player the luxury of a possibility to escape his moral responsibility for his own violent in-game actions; not in the form of an understandable reaction to prior violence towards him; neither are his enemies de-humanized creatures without dignity, who can be shot at his own leisure; and neither is an alternative option to act provided to and for him. He must carry the whole burden, and only he.

In a lesser sense, several games characters voice such a problematization. Think of what Wallace Bree from *Half-Life 2* said to the player, quoted at the start of this article: "Tell me, Dr. Freeman, if you can: you have destroyed so much, what is it exactly that you have created? Can you name even one thing? I thought not" (Valve 2006: n.p.). And indeed, the player has not built up anything, but destroyed creatures and buildings all the more. In *Bioshock Infinite*, when the young woman Elizabeth witnessed Booker DeWitt's slaying of hordes of enemies, she comments: "Do you ever get used to it? The killing?" (Irrational Games 2013: n.p.). To which he replies: "Faster than you can imagine" (ibid: n.p.). And again, the player is in the midst of what outside the game would be considered a murder spree.

In a greater sense this property of violence can also be found as an integrate part of the game's grand narrative. An example that immediately springs to the mind of experienced gamers is that of *Spec Ops. The Line* (Yager Development 2012). It incorporates many elements discussed earlier in this paper. At a first sight it is a fairly standard military combat simulator, but underneath is questions everything that genre has to offer (Lee 2014; Jørgensen 2016: Keogh 2013; Hamilton 2013). The choice of genre is remarkable, since it is exactly the military shooter that has provoked the most outspoken criticism towards videogames as propagators of violence (Romaniuk 2017; Schulzke 2013; Wells 2012; Payne 2016).

Spec Ops. The Line is a third-person tactical shooter, taking place in an apocalyptic version of Dubai – probably the reason the game has been banned in the United Arabs Emirates (Reed/Blain 2017; Rego 2012) – and is based on Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and the film based on that novella *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Coppola (1979). Massive sandstorms have cut of Dubai from the rest of the world, resulting in countless Emiratis and foreign migrant workers to wait for the inevitable end. The 33rd Infantry Battalion of the United States Army, on their way back from Afghanistan,

volunteered to help the citizens, defying a direct order to leave the city themselves. After contact with the 33rd had seized, the United States send in an elite three-man Delta Force team to carry out reconnaissance.

This small group is led by Captain Martin Walker (voiced by Nolan North), who served with 33rd's leader, Colonel Konrad, in Afghanistan. Walker is accompanied by 1st Lieutenant Alphonso Adams and Staff Sergeant John Lugo. When arrived in the city, Walker and his team find out that the 33rd has installed martial law began committing atrocities on the civilian population. To complicate things even more, 33rd's staff members tried, quite unsuccessfully, to issue a coup d'état, while some civilians started a CIA-fused insurgence of their own. Within this wasps' nest, the Group Walker must establish their own survival.

The games include a heavy ludo-narrative dissonance, but here it is intended and an important part of the game's narrative. The game instructs the player – by means of its ludic feedback mechanisms – to push through and kill everything that comes in his path, while simultaneously mocks and judged the same player – by means of its narrative – for doing so. A poignant example is found in the 5th level ('The Edge'). Walker overhears the following conversation between two 'rogue' 33rd soldiers:

> **Soldier 1:** You know, with all the shit goin' on, I forget how beautiful this place can be.
> **Soldier 2:** I feel ya.
> **Soldier 1:** You know, sometimes at night I'll just come out here and sit. Just listen to the wind.
> **Soldier 2:** Yeah, reminds me of how the wind used to howl through the trees where I grew up. Kinda peaceful, actually.
> **Soldier 1:** Hard to believe there's any peace in a place like this, huh?
> **Soldier 2:** You gotta look for peace, not matter where you are, man. Helps remind you what you're fightin' for.

This part of the narrative is intended to invoke feelings of recognition and sympathy in Walker, urging him to see his adversaries for more than just 'enemies' (dehumanization), but as fellow-Americans who have dreams about a peaceful future. Ludically however, the player has no other choice to continue the game than to shot them both. Sneaking past them is technically impossible, and when they see Walker they will immediately engage him, not in the least because Adams and Lugo – whose actions are out of control of the player – will not hesitate to start firing.

The game features – in the same vein – a number of pseudo moral choice; moral in the sense that they present a moral dilemma for the player to solve (moralization), but pseudo in the sense that any of these choices are utterly meaningless. You can choose to kill a 33rd soldier or let him escape (level 4, 'The Refugees'); choose to save a CIA agent, who is apparently necessary to escape the hell of Dubai, or some innocent civilians (level 7, 'The Battle'); choose to mercy kill another CIA agent who just robbed the Dubai population of an important water reservoir, or let him burn in the car crash he himself is responsible for (level 11, 'Alone'); and choose to kill an angry Dubai mob that just hanged Lugo, scare

them off by shooting in the air, or let the mob stone Walker and Adams, nudging the player back to the first two options (level 13, 'Adams').

Some of these pseudo moral choices stand out, for different reasons. At a certain point, Walker and his team see two men strung up by their arms, their mouths taped over. By radio, Konrad explains to Walker that these two 'animals' couldn't control their instincts: the civilian stole water – a capital offense in desert-struck Dubai – while the soldier, sent to apprehend him, murdered his family in the process. Walker now must decide who has to die, by shooting either of them dead. This moral conundrum, however, can be circumvented. Walker can try to leave, but he will be shot by snipers. Walker can stall his decision, but the same snipers will target Adams and then Walker. Or Walker can shoot the snipers – which is no simple task – resulting in even more deaths than at the initial choice. In the end, a choice is presented, but without any in-game consequences (except for some dialogue). The choice is narrative, not ludic.

The second one is the most well-known scene from *Spec Ops* (level 8, 'The Gate'). Walker and his team approach a heavy formation of 33rd soldiers, who were, just some instances ago, rounding up civilians. While it is unclear why the civilians are rounded up, the game taught the player earlier that the 33rd soldiers did not hesitate to execute innocent civilians in order to get a CIA agent talking (level 7, 'The Battle'). The player assumes the 33rd is up to no good. When overseeing the battle scene, Adams point to a M120 mortar. When Walker contemplates the possibility to use is, Lugo remarks it fires white phosphorus rounds. Lugo disagrees.

Lugo: You know we can't use it.
Adams: We might not have a choice, Lugo.
Lugo: There's always a choice.
Walker: No, there's really not.

Walker's observation is the hermeneutical key to understand the game's apparent ludo-narrative dissonance: you don't have a choice. Walker, and therefore the player, has no other choice to proceed through the game than use the mortar. When choosing to take down the soldiers by conventional means, the game just keeps spawning enemies until Walker and his team are run over. And even though a real player can always choose to quit the game – thus avoiding the use of the phosphor – the text-immanent reader cannot: he must use the weapon.

When using the mortar – or rather the laptop attached to it – the game interface changes from the usual third-person perspective to a top-down view, overseeing the battlefield. Walker/the player can move a crosshair over the battlefield, where soldiers are represented as white hallows on a black background, and choose where to shoot the phosphor. In other games, the player is not confronted with the consequences of such an attack, leaving his casualties to the imagination (trivialization and/or dehumanization), but in *Spec Ops* the player, as Walker, has literally to walk through it.

Walker and his team witness the effects of the phosphor on the 33rd soldiers: they are heavily burned, some crying and growling in their death struggle. One of them shouts: "Hello? Is anyone there? Please, I'm-I'm trapped. I-I can't feel my legs" (Yager Development 2012: n.p.). Another one, just before dying, whispers: "We were helping…" (ibid:

n.p.). Confused over the content of the dying man's words, the three approach the outer section of the battlefield, where they discover another group of casualties of their phosphor attack: a substantial group of refugees, who were – apparently – taken by the 33rd to be evacuated.

It is a haunting scene, not only for Walker, Adam, and Lugo, but also for the player. Women, men, and children are heavily burned, exposing partially their carcasses. During the cut scene, the camera focusses on a mutilated mother-and-child – evoking associations of the Christian iconography of Mother Mary and Child. She embraces her child tightly, holding her to her breast, while covering her eyes with her hands. Walker is lost for words – it was his words that initiated the attack and his directions the mortar shells fell to – but Lugo and Adams argue bitterly. Desperately Adams repeats what Walker said earlier: "We didn't have a choice!" (ibid: n.p.).

The game presents the consequences of the player's choice to the player in bright and horrifying colours, without any room for properties as motivation, dehumanization, trivialization, or even nknowntion (since the choice is a pseudo one). And while other games implicitly make the connection between the player and the player's avatar – like the earlier discussed instances in *Half-Life 2* or *BioShock Infinite – Spec Ops* is really addressing the game-immanent player in a direct and unavoidable way, thus transferring the moral responsibility from an in-game character like Gordon Freeman or Booker DeWitt to the one controlling that character. And the game is quite self-conscious about it. When Walker storms a radio tower, the DJ Robert Darden (level 12, 'The Rooftops') comments: "Aw, jeez… where's all this violence coming from, man? Is it the videogames? I bet it's the videogames"(ibid: n.p.).

This self-conscious, fourth wall-breaking capacity of the game's text-immanent author is also apparent in several loading screens shown in the game. A number of them try to – implicitly – sooth the consciousness of the player by explaining that the use of phosphor is not forbidden, and that collateral damage is unfortunate but also unavoidable and therefore not immoral.

> Collateral damage is any incidental damage that occurs as a result of military action. Such damage is not unlawful if it is not excessive. (…) Collateral damage can be justified, if the gain outweighs the cost. How much do you think Adams and Lugo are worth? (…) White phosphorus is a common allotrope used in many types of munitions. It can set fire to cloth, fuel, ammunition, and flesh. (…) Though controversial, the use of white phosphorus against personnel is not prohibited. (…) Survivors of white phosphorus often suffer severe damage to the kidneys and liver, as well as the cardiovascular and nervous systems. (Loading screens 45, 99, 46, 47, and 94)

Eventually, the immanent author of the game becomes personal, directing himself explicitly to the immanent-player of the game, judging his actions in the phosphor incident:

> White phosphorus is a common allotrope used in your slaughter at The Gate. It can set fire to soldiers and the innocent civilians they are trying to help. (Loading screen 96)

More and more loading screens appear addressing, judging, and even mocking the player ("you"):

> You are still a good person. There is no escape. (…) The US military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care? Can you even remember why you came here? (…) This is all your fault. (…) Do you feel like a hero yet? (…) How many Americans have you killed today? (…) It's time for you to wake up. (…) If you were a better person, you wouldn't be here. (…) You can't go home. (Loading screens 93, 95, 97, 100, 101 through 105, and 108)

The screens relate an ambiguous message: the pl'yer should not be here, but cannot leave either, playing with the distinction between the text-external real player (who can quit) and the text-immanent one (who cannot do so). The screen also invokes the notion of 'the real', suggesting the possibility to distinguish between in-game and out-game violence, again playing with the identification between real and immanent player.

> To kill for yourself is murder. To kill for your government is heroic. To kill for entertainment is harmless. (…) Kill a man, and you are a murderer. Kill everyone, and you are a god. (Loading screens 106 and 109)

When Walker finally reaches the headquarters of Colonel Konrad, the true nature of the game events become clear for both Walker and the immanent reader. Konrad is already dead – he killed himself much earlier already – but is still capable of talking to Walker in the form of a materialized voice in Walker own head. This Konrad explains that Walker's PTSS – developed earlier in Afghanistan – played tricks with his mind: almost the whole game was a re-enactment of real events as they appear in Walker's mind, desperately to find moral justifications for what he did (the choice I discussed above).

The player now has to choose: he can shoot Konrad, shoot his Walker's reflection in the mirror, or wait until Konrad pulls the trigger. When Walker is killed, the game simply ends by showing Walker's dead body. When Konrad is killed, the player is given another choice. Walker, dressed in Konrad's tenue, is met by American soldiers trying to pull him out of Dubai. When the player hands himself over to the soldiers and enters a military nknowne, one of the soldiers asks him: "How did you survive?" (ibid: n.p.) to which he answers, "Who said that I did?" (ibid: n.p.). When the player chooses to engage the soldiers (and win the ensuing fight by killing all soldiers), Walker is seen taking one of the radio's telling: "Gentlemen, welcome to Dubai!" (ibid: n.p.) the exact same sentence he uses at the beginning of the game towards his – now dead – comrades Lugo and Adams.

The game offers different endings, but – as was the case with all other choices – there is no really 'good' or 'bad' ending. In all scenarios Walker is dead or must live with the ever-present memories of the atrocities he has done in both Afghanistan and Dubai. War, violence, crimes: it can only go one way, the destruction of all involved. The in-game violence is principally problematized by *Spec Ops*, more or less forcing the player to engage in crimes (ludic), and then scrutinize them about it (narrative). All responsibility is placed in the hands of the immanent player, who has no change whatsoever to steer into clearer

water, to resolve the situation peacefully, or to not engage at all. Violence is a path, the game claims, to which is no escape and no survivors.

Fascination, terror, and morality

Discussing the phenomenon of violence in digital games is possible on various levels, as I have discussed in the introduction. One could take on an author's perspective – why did this developer choose to incorporate a violence scene? One could also take an audience's perspective – what are the effects of in-game violence on actual gamers? But one could also look at the narrative use of violence in games – what are the properties of violence within the game's narrative? I have identified five of such narrative properties: as motivation for the protagonist/player, trivialization of violence, dehumanization of the antagonists, moralization of violence, and problematization of violence.

Does this have any ramifications for the world outside the game? In overviewing the five narrative properties of violence in digital games, two indicative aspects surface: (1) we, as human beings playing violent games, are both fascinated and terrified by violence (see table #1); and (2) we have an ambiguous attitude towards violence we perform in the games we play (see table #2).

Our fascination with in-game violence surfaces in the property of trivialization, in which the on-screen enemy is reduced to a mere toy or object the player is free to do what he likes. This kind of violence empowers the player, makes him feel in charge, in command, even god-like. No further thoughts are given to those who are killed in-game. They have no history, no future, no distinct characteristics, no family, no friends, no value other than being butchered.

This kind of fascination with in-game violence borders to the property of dehumanization. Aliens from outer space, Nazis, Arabs, communists, zombies, monsters from hell, all are creatures robbed of any human characteristics, other than the one allowing the players to kill them without mercy: they are different. While this otherness allows the player to purge them mercilessly, these in-game enemies are not just fascinating to kill (trivialization), but also provide the necessary evilness to feel proud of doing so. The threat these enemies pose is terrifying enough to negotiate any hesitation the player might feel taking them on. Especially when the treat is directed towards they player or the avatar's loved ones (motivation). I will return to the last two properties later on.

Table 1: Narrative properties of in-game violence, ranging from being communicated by the game as (very) fascinating to (very) terrifying.

(Very) fascinating	trivialization
	dehumanization
Ambiguous	motivation
(Very) terrifying	moralization
	problematization

Secondly, the five properties show different (in-game) moral options towards the use of violence by the protagonist/player. In the case of trivialization, there is no moral consideration present in the game's narrative: fun and explosions do not mix well with ethical deliberations (if one wants to avoid a massive ludic-narrative dissonance, that is). In the case of dehumanization, however, an implicit moral positioning is in place: the game instructs the player it is morally justifiable to murder all his enemies, because of their inherent and self-explanatory wickedness. No one is allowed to think twice about ethics if confronted with zombies or Nazis. The same applies to the motivational property: when the protagonist is acting out of well-provided vengeance towards his former perpetrator, the game implicitly insinuates moral justifiability (motivation).

If trivialization is presented as amoral, and dehumanization and motivation as moral, what leaves that for the last two properties? Well, in the case or the moralization property, the game communicates ethical ambiguity, both in terms of giving multiple options to resolve a situation, usually a violent and a non-violent one, and in terms of the moral value of said options. In some games utilizing a morality system, the options given to a player remain morally vague, as was the case in the *Dishonored* series. Is killing always the ethically evil option, no matter what the alternative is? Is stealing from an enemy corpse better or worse than stealing from a living citizen? Morality is very complex and almost in every practical case very contextual and contextualized, a very level of sophistication no game can quite deliver (yet).

If in the case of moralization, the game communicates moral ambiguity towards the player regarding the use of in-game violence, the property of problematization tells the player exactly how immoral his actions actually are. *Spec Ops. The Line* is the perfect example of this property and of the kind of games that signal implicitly to the player how immoral his behaviour is. These kind of games forces the player to contemplate his assumption of the self-explanatory nature of his own use of violence. In the case of *Spec Ops*, the only possibility for the player to escape (his own) moral judgement provided to him by the game, is quitting playing all together; a possibility open for any real player, but not for an text-immanent one.

Table 2: Narrative properties of in-game violence, ranging from being communicated by the game as amoral, moral, morally ambiguous, or immoral.

Amoral	trivialization
Moral	dehumanization
	motivation
Ambiguous	moralization
Immoral	problematization

Consequentially, on the level of moralization our stance towards in-game violence is somewhere in between fascination and terror. We can be fascinating (still) by the power and agency we have on the unfolding of the game's narrative – explicitly by our choices

– but when the game places the player in a morally difficult, ambiguous, or even 'unfair' position (that is, when no morally justifiable solution can be achieved in the game), the fascination can be altered to or be mixed with terror.

This moral ambiguity is erased in the property of problematization, and therefore the violence appears more terrifying than fascinating to the immanent player. The phosphor scene from – again – *Spec Ops. The Line* is a haunting example of this. Motivation, trivialization, and dehumanization are out of order in this example, because Walker/player has no grudge towards the civilians, and neither are these civilians portrayed as anything but innocent. And since the player has no (real) agency in the decision to use the phosphor or not, moralization is also outside the parameters. The aftermath of the phosphor attack has a terrifying and eve stating impact on both Walker and the immanent player.

Final thoughts

In-game violence is a complex and fascinating topic within game studies. Much attention has been paid to the effects of in-game violence outside the boundaries of the games themselves, but the narrative complexity of the use of in-game violence has been somewhat neglected. Nevertheless, digital game feature a lot of different ways they use violence towards and by the player as a part of their narratives, either explicitly or implicitly communicated to the player.

The differentiation between these different narrative properties of in-game violence is necessary for a deeper understanding of videogames narratives specifically, but also for a broader understanding of their cultural significance generally. Real-life violence exists, it has been a part of human history for as long as we can remember. Fictional violence, may it be in the form of novels, films, or games, also exists, and has been a part of our collective memory for as long as we invented writing.

The exact relationship between fictional and real-life violence is still heavily debated upon, as I have shown earlier in this article. It might be that in-game violence stimulate real players to act more violently outside the game. It might be the opposite: games providing a safe environment where violent inclinations of real players can find a consequence-free outlet. One thing is for sure: both are in a relationship with one another. And studying the one, will shed light on the other.

If we study real-life violence, we can understand what place it has in our fiction. And if we study in-game violence, as I have tried to do, we can understand more of the society these games exist in, are produced by and have their influences on. Understanding the different narrative properties of in-game violence might help us to understand why people behave violently outside games, as they empirically do. The properties of motivation, trivialization, dehumanization, moralization, and problematization occur also in real-life.

Knowing the game is key to understanding it.

References

[anonymous] (2019): *Rape Day*, [unknown]: Desk Plant.
2K Boston (2007): *Bioshock*, Novato, CA: 2K Games.
4A Games (2010): *Metro 2033*, Agoura Hills, CA: THQ.
4A Games (2013): *Metro: Last Light*, Höfen: Deep Silver.
4A Games (2019): *Metro: Exodus*, Höfen: Deep Silver.
Adams, Ernest (2013): "Will computer games ever be a legitimate art form?" In: Andy Clarke; Grethe Mitchell (eds.), *Videogames an art*, second edition, Bristol: Intellect, pp. 417–30.
Amendola, Aaron (2016): "Ludonarrative dissonance and a tale of two Lara Crofts." *Medium*. Accessed 27 May 2021, https://medium.com/@TurboHoodie/ludonarrative-dissonance-and-a-tale-of-two-lara-crofts-46d3f4d8be8b.
Anderson, Craig; Gentile, Douglas; Buckley, Katherine (2007): *Violent video game effects on children and adolescent. Theory, research, and public policy*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
Appelbaum, Robert (2013): "Notes towards an aesthetics of violence." In: *Studia Neophilologica* 85/2, pp. 119–32.
Arkane Studios (2012): *Dishonored*, Rockville, MD: Bethesda Softworks.
Arkane Studios (2016): *Dishonored 2*, Rockville, MD: Bethesda Softworks.
Bartle, Richard (2016): *MMOs from the inside out. The history, fun, and art of massively-multiplayer online role-playing games*, New York, NY: Apress.
Bethesda Game Studios (2004): *Fable*, Redmond, WA: Microsoft Game Studios.
Bethesda Game Studios (2008): *Fallout 3*, Rockville, MD: Bethesda Softworks.
Bethesda Game Studios (2015): *Fallout 4*, Rockville, MD: Bethesda Softworks.
BioWare (2007): *Mass Effect*, Redmond, WA: Microsoft Game Studios.
BioWare (2010): *Mass Effect 2*, Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts.
BioWare (2012): *Mass Effect 3*, Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts.
Black Isle Studios (1998): *Fallout 2*, Los Angeles, CA: Interplay Productions.
Bosman, Frank (2016): "Nothing is true, everything is permitted. The portrayal of the Nizari Isma'ilis in the Assassin's Creed game series." In: *Online* 10, pp. 6–26.
Bosman, Frank (2018): "Death Narratives: A Typology of Narratological Embeddings of Player's Death in Digital Games." In: *Gamenvironments* 9, pp. 12–52.
Bosman, Frank (2019a): "There is no solution. Wicked problems in digital games." In: *Games and culture* 14/5, pp. 543–59.
Bosman, Frank (2019b): *Gaming and the divine. A new systematic theology of video games*, London, UK: Routledge.
Bosman, Frank (2021): "Messiah; Christ." In: Kelly Murphy; Nicole Tilford (eds.), *Bible and Science Fiction*, New York, NY: SBL Press.
Bosman, Frank; Mock Leo (2016): "We do not pray, we invent. Jews, Judaism and Jewish mysticism in the video game *Wolfenstein. The New Order*." In: Albertina Houtman; Tamar Kadari; Marcel Poorthuis; Vered Tohar (eds.), *Religious stories in transformation. Conflict, revision and reception*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 376–98.

Bosman, Frank; van Wieringen, Archibald (2021): "Reading The Book of Joseph. A communication-oriented analysis of Far Cry 5." In: *Journal of religion, film, and media* 7/1, pp. 145–71.

Brock, Bastian; Jetten, Jolanda; Radke, Helena (2011): "Cyber-dehumanization. Violent video game play diminished our humanity." In: *Journal of experimental social psychology* 48, pp. 486–91.

Burgun, Keith (2015): "Stop worrying about video game violence, and start thinking about dehumanization." *Polygon*. Accessed 27 May 2021, https://www.polygon.com/2015/6/24/8834027/video-game-violence-dehumanization.

Coppola, Francis (1979): *Apocalypse Now*, Beverly Hills, CA: United Artists.

Croteam (2001): *Serious Sam. The First Encounter*, New York, NY: Gathering of Developers.

Croteam (2002): *Serious Sam. The Second Encounter*, New York, NY: Gathering of Developers.

Croteam (2005): *Serious Sam 2*, Novato, CA: 2K Games.

Croteam (2011): *Serious Sam 3, BFE*. Austin, TX: Devolver Digital.

Croteam (2020): *Serious Sam 4*, Austin, TX: Devolver Digital.

Crystal Dynamics (2013): *Tomb Raider*, Tokyo: Square Enix.

Destructive Creations (2015): *Hatred*, Gliwice: Destructive Creations.

DICE (2005): *Battlefield 3*, Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts.

DMA Design (1997): *Grand Theft Auto*, New York, NY: BMG Interactive.

DMA Design (1999): *Grand Theft Auto 2*, New York, NY: Rockstar.

DMA Design (2001): *Grand Theft Auto III*, New York, NY: Rockstar.

DreamWorks Interactive (1999): *Medal of Honor*, Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts.

Gearbox Software (2009): *Borderlands*, Novato, CA: 2K Games.

Gearbox Software (2012): *Borderlands 2*, Novato, CA: 2K Games.

Gearbox Software (2019): *Borderlands 3*, Novato, CA: 2K Games.

Gearbox Software/2K Australia (2014): *Borderlands: the Pre-Sequel*, Novato, NA: 2K Games.

Gimpel, Diane (2013): *Violence in video games*, Minneapolis, MN: ABDO.

Gray Matter Interactive (2001): *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, Santa Monica, CA: Activision.

Greitemeyer, Tobias; McLatche, Neil (2011): "Denying humanness to others. A newly discovered mechanism by which violent video games increase aggressive behavior." In: *Psychological Science* 22/5, pp. 659–65.

Guerrilla Games (2017): *Horizon Zero Dawn*, San Mateo, CA: Sony Interactive Entertainment.

Gunter, Barrie (2016): *Does playing video games make players more violent?* London, UK: Macmillan.

Hamilton, Kirk (2013): "Spec Ops writer on violent games: 'We're better than that'." *Kotaku*. Accessed 27 May 2021, https://kotaku.com/spec-ops-writer-on-violent-games-were-better-than-th-460992384.

Harron, Mary (2000): American Psycho, Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate Films; Culver City: Columbia TriStar Motion Picture Group.

Hocking, Clint (2007): "Ludonarrative dissonance in Bioshock." *Click Nothing*. Accessed 27 May 2021, http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html.

Horiuchi, Vince (2009): "Oh my. The 'Call of Duty' has troubling scene. Video game. Protagonist guns down innocent people at airport." *The Salt Lake Tribune*, November 16, 2009.
Id Software (1992): *Wolfenstein 3D*, Aalborg: Apogee Software.
Id Software (1993): *Doom*, Richardson, TX: id Software.
Id Software (1994): *Doom II, Hell on Earth*, Richardson, TX: id Software.
Id Software (2004): *Doom 3*, Santa Monica, CA: Activision.
Id Software (2016): *Doom*, Rockville, MD: Bethesda Softworks.
Id Software (2020): *Doom Eternal*, Rockville, MD: Bethesda Softworks.
Infinity Ward (2009): *Call of Duty, Modern Warfare 2*. Santa Monica, CA: Activision.
Interplay Productions (1997): *Fallout*, Los Angeles, CA: Interplay Productions.
Irrational Games (2013): *Bioshock Infinite*, Novato, CA: 2K Games.
Jackson, Mike (2008): "Jack Thompson hounds Rockstar Boss'... MOTHER." Accessed 27 May 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20120813163814/http://www.computerandvideogames.com/187662/jack-thompson-hounds-rockstar-boss-mother/.
Jørgensen, Kristine (2016): "The positive discomfort of Spec ops. The Line." In: *Game Studies* 16/2. Accessed 27 May 2021, http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/jorgensenkristine.
Keogh, Brendan (2013): "Spec Ops. The Line's conventional subversion of the military shooter." In: J. Sharp; C. Pearce; H. Kennedy (eds.), *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: De-Fragging Game Studies*, pp. 1–17. Digital Games Research Association DiGRA, United States of America. Accessed 27 May 2021, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_55.pdf.
Knoll, Tobias (2015): "Are those the only two solutions? Dealing with choice, agency and religion in digital games." In: *Online* 7, pp. 207–26.
Knoll, Tobias (2018): "Instant karma. Moral decision making systems in digital games." In: *Religion* 9/4, pp. 126–60. Accessed 27 May, 2021, https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/4/131.
Kojima Productions (2019): *Death Stranding*, San Mateo, CA: Sony Interactive Entertainment.
Kubrick, Stanley (1971): *A Clockwork Orange*, Burbank, CA: Warner Bros.
Lee, Emily (2014): "Spec Ops. The Line: addressing violence & atrocities in a procedural medium." *Entropy*. Accessed 27 May 2021, https://entropymag.org/spec-ops-the-line-addressing-violence-atrocities-in-a-procedural-medium/.
Levinson, Barry (1987): *Good Morning, Vietnam*, Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, Inc.
Lionhead Studios (2008): *Fable II*, Redmond, WA: Microsoft Game Studios.
Lionhead Studios (2010): *Fable III*, Redmond, WA: Microsoft Game Studios.
Lopes, Dominic (2010): *A philosophy of computer art*, London, UK: Routledge.
MachineGames (2014): *Wolfenstein. The New Order*, Rockville, MD: Bethesda Softworks.
MachineGames (2015): *Wolfenstein. The Old Blood*, Rockville, MD: Bethesda Softworks.
MachineGames (2017): *Wolfenstein II. The New Colossus*, Rockville, MD: Bethesda Softworks.
MachineGames (2019): *Wolfenstein. Young Blood*, Rockville, MD: Bethesda Softworks.

Markman, Art (2011): "Video games, violence, and dehumanization." *Psychology Today*. Accessed 27 May 2021, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/ulterior-motives/201105/video-games-violence-and-dehumanization.

Matulef, Jeffrey (2014): "Controversial mass murdering game Hatred appears on Steam Greenlight." Accessed 27 May 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20141216220745/, http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2014-12-15-controversial-mass-murdering-game-hatred-appears-on-steam-greenlight.

Midway Studios San Diego (1997): *Doom 64*, San Diego, CA: Midway Home Entertainment.

Mirrlees, Tanner; Ibaid, Taha (2021): "The virtual killing of Muslims. Digital war games, islamophobia, and the global war on terror." In: *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 6/1, pp. 33–51.

Nguyen, Richard (2016) "Beyond the moral binary. Decision-making in video games." *With a Terrible Fate*. Accessed 27 May 2021, https://withaterriblefate.com/2016/04/25/beyond-the-moral-binary-decision-making-in-video-games/.

Panic-Cidic, Natali (2019): "The (American) way of experiencing video game violence." In: Federico Igarzábal; Michael Debus; Curtis Maughan (eds.), *Violence | Perception | Video games. New directions in game research*, Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 39–52.

Payne, Matthew (2016): *Playing war. Military video games after 9/11*, New York, NY: Now York University Press.

People Can Fly; Epic Games (2011): *Bulletstorm*, Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts.

Punjab Information Technology Board (2014): *Pakistan Army Retribution*, [unknown]

Rahool, Munir (2016): "Review: This Army Public School attack game fails on every front." *Dawn*. Accessed 27 May 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20160221012130/http://www.dawn.com/news/1232492.

Raven Software (2009): *Wolfenstein*, Santa Monica, CA: Activision.

Reed, Ashley; Blain, Louise (2017): "19 games banned across the world, and why they got the axe." *GamesRadar+*. Accessed 27 May 2021, https://www.gamesradar.com/top-18-banned-video-games/2/.

Rego, Nick (2012): "Does Dubai-based Spec Ops hit a nerve?" *IGN*. Accessed 27 May 2021, https://me.ign.com/en/spec-ops-the-line/58105/feature/does-dubai-based-spec-ops-hit-a-nerve.

Remedy Entertainment (2019): *Control*, Milan: 505 Games.

Rockstar North (2002): *Grand Theft. Vice City*, New York, NY: Rockstar.

Rockstar North (2004): *Grand Theft Auto. San Andreas*, New York, NY: Rockstar Games.

Rockstar North (2008): *Grand Theft Auto IV*, New York, NY: Rockstar Games.

Rockstar North (2013): *Grand Theft Auto V*, New York, NY: Rockstar Games.

Romaniuk, Scott (2017): "How the US military is using 'violent, chaotic, beautiful' video games to train soldiers." *The Conversation*. Accessed 7 March 2017. Accessed May 27, 2021, https://theconversation.com/how-the-us-military-is-using-violent-chaotic-beautiful-video-games-to-train-soldiers-73826.

Sab (2014): "Ludonarrative dissonance. When details matter." *Access The Animus*. Accessed 5 May 2021, http://www.accesstheanimus.com/Ludonarrative_dissonance.html.

Schulzke, Marcus (2013): "Rethinking military gaming. America's Army and its critics." In: *Games and culture* 8/2, pp. 59–76.

Sheehan, Paul (2013): *Modernism and the aesthetics of violence*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Sicart, Miguel (2013): "Moral dilemmas in computer games." In: *Design Issues* 29, pp. 28–37.

Šisler, Vit (2008): "Digital Arabs representation in video games." In: *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11/2, pp. 203–20.

Svelch, Jaroslav (2010): "The good, the bad, and the player. The challenges to moral engagement." In: K. Schrier; D. Gibson (eds.), *Ethics and game design. Teaching values through play*, New York, NY: Information Science Reference, pp. 52–68.

Symonds, Gwyn (2008): *The aesthetics of violence in contemporary media*, New York, NY: Continuum.

Tarantino, Quentin (2012): *Django Unchained*, New York City, NY: The Weinstein Company; Culver City: Sony Pictures Releasing.

Tavinor, Grant (2009): *The art of videogames*, London, UK: Wiley- Blackwell.

TeamTNT (1996): *Final Doom*, Richardson, TX: id Software.

Toh, Weimin (2019): *A multimodial approach to video games and the player experience*, London, UK: Routledge.

Ubisoft Montreal (2007): *Assassin's Creed*, Montreal: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2008): *Prince of Persia*, Montreal: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2009): *Assassin's Creed II*, Montreal: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2012): *Assassin's Creed III*, Montreal: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2013): *Assassin's Creed IV. Black Flag*, Montreal: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2014): *Assassin's Creed Unity*, Montreal: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2014): *Far Cry 4*, Montreal: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2017): *Assassin's Creed Origins*, Montreal: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2018): *Far Cry 5*, Montreal: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Quebec (2015): *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, Montreal: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Quebec (2018): *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, Montreal: Ubisoft.

Valeriano, Brandon; Habel, Philip (2004): *Half- Life 2*, Bellevue, WA: Valve.

Valeriano, Brandon; Habel, Philip (2006): *Half- Life 2. Episode One*, Bellevue, WA: Valve.

Valeriano, Brandon; Habel, Philip (2007): *Half- Life 2. Episode Two*, Bellevue, WA: Valve.

Valeriano, Brandon; Habel, Philip (2016): "Which country is the most frequent enemy in violent video games?" *The Washington Post*. Accessed 21 April 2016. Accessed May 27, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/04/21/do-video-games-change-how-we-think-about-our-enemies-we-investigated/.

Valve (1998): *Half- Life*, Los Angeles, CA: Sierra Studios.

Van Wieringen, Archibald (2020): "Methodological Developments in Biblical Exegesis: Author – Text – Reader." In: *Analecta of the UCU* (Series: Theology) 7, pp. 27–46.

Wales, Matt (2019): "Valve under fire as sexually explicit game glorifying rape is listed on Steam." *Eurogamer*. Accessed 27 May 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20190305230435/, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2019-03-04-valve-under-fire-as-sexually-explicit-game-glorifying-rape-is-listed-on-steam.

Wells, Darren (2012): "A call to arms. The hamster wheel of the military shooter." *GamesRadar+*. Accessed 27 May 2021, https://www.gamesradar.com/uk/call-arms-hamster-wheel-military-shooter/.

Yager Development (2012): *Spec Ops. The Line*, Novato, CA: 2K Games.
Zagal, José (2009): "Ethically notable videogames. Moral dilemmas and gameplay." Paper presented at the international DIGRA conference, London, UK. Accessed 27 May 2021, https://www.academia.edu/2809395/Ethically_notable_videogames_Moral_dilemmas_and_gameplay.