

What's wrong with playing violent video games?

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Q. I've been playing first-person shooter games for a while now. I don't think there is anything wrong with them. I just see them as "games." But is there something wrong with playing those kinds of video games?

A. That's a very good question. A response involves a good deal of reflection on the role of entertainment, as well as the place of violence in a world affected by sin.

The kinds of games I imagine that you are referring to are principally games like "Call of Duty," "Halo" or "Grand Theft Auto." There are many others (the market is totally saturated with variations of these best-selling games), and they take on various formats and use different scenarios. Some games have the participants "merely" killing aliens or zombies (so you aren't killing "people," but merely "monsters"), while others place the gamer in an actual wartime situation, simulating everything from D-Day to the war in Afghanistan. Still others let the players be criminals.

While it seems obvious that the kind of target involved in the game does affect the moral seriousness of the activity (it is one thing to be shooting at aliens and another to randomly kill police officers while on a crime spree), the entire premise of first-person shooter games seems inherently flawed.

That being said, I am criticizing neither gun use nor violence in and of itself. Unfortunately, guns are tools that have a place in a fallen world. There are times when the use of force is the right and noble thing. It is wise for us not to fall into the trap of blaming guns (or even these video games) as the cause of evil violence in the world.

There is an attitude in our culture that seems to want to defang or declaw people (male or female) who have strength. There seems to be an undercurrent in our society that wishes to emasculate men. We praise the virtues of patience, gentleness and compassion, and rightly so! But we also seem to fear the virtues of fortitude, bravery and a readiness to act with decisiveness. In an effort to protect ourselves from people misusing their power, we seem bent on raising a generation of young people without any real strength.

Does this generation possess moral courage?

Now, I know that I am speaking in vague generalities, but I believe that we can all recognize this. Have the last few generations (including my own) been marked by courage and self-sacrifice? The invasion of Normandy was terrible and horrific, and we pray that no people will ever have to do something like that again. But do we think that the young people of this generation (or the previous generation) have the moral courage to do such a thing? Maybe they do. But it seems a bit more like there is a moral vacuum there.

It is into this moral vacuum that these first-person shooter games are introduced. Would you want a gun to be placed into the hands of a person without a moral compass?

A person might enter the military and be taught how to use a weapon. Someone might be trained in martial arts and learn self defense and how to defend others. This person might learn how to be properly "aggressive." But this is worlds apart from the "training" that a young person receives when playing a video game. In the first place, there is no discernible discipline. There is no clear sense of "we are training you to be strong, and also equipping you with the best way for you to use that strength." Rather, playing these games is an exercise in acts of aggression with no evident value other than entertainment.

Where do we draw the line?

This is possibly the critical difference. These games are examples of “violence as entertainment.” The problem with violence as entertainment is not only that it depersonalizes human beings, but also that the violation of human dignity becomes amusement. This is one reason why being trained in martial arts (even something like Mixed Martial Arts) is radically different from watching an MMA fight. In the one case, physical and mental strength is honed and disciplined. In the other, a person is simply entertained by watching one person physically assault another human being. There is value in martial arts training. There is no value in being amused by images of two human beings hurting each other.

In fact, don't we recognize this as a form of sadism? Taking pleasure in another person's pain is a clear violation of human dignity. Is this changed when the violence is merely “simulated”? After all, no one is hurt in a video game! It seems a little extreme to get all worked up over a video game.

What if the violence was of a different sort? Recently, some Japanese video game companies have come under fire for creating video games where the first-person player would stalk and sexually assault a young woman. Many groups called for the prohibition of these kinds of games, and rightly so. But, one might argue, this violence is merely simulated. No real human being is assaulted, only a computer program. And yet, most thinking people would realize that there is something desperately evil about such games. They have no value. In fact, they only serve to introduce more evil into the minds of those playing these games.

First-person shooter games do as much good in cultivating healthy masculine strength and aggression as these “rape games” do in cultivating a healthy sexuality.

Lastly, all of this is coming from the perspective of a person of good will. What about a follower of Christ? It seems pretty clear: There is no room for a Christian to find entertainment in the suffering and death of others (whether real or simulated). While such games are morally objectionable from a humanistic standpoint, they are even more odious to a Catholic Christian. We may never take pleasure in being entertained by the depiction of violence against another person.

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