

Virtual violence

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How virtual is virtual violence against women?

With online interaction and gaming now a fact of daily life for a great many people, violence against women in computer games and in virtual (online) environments is becoming a pressing issue for both legal and ethical reasons. This paper summarises two kinds of “virtual” violence.¹ The first, which can be called “video game” violence, occurs in one-player games (such as Grand Theft Auto) where the player is interacting solely with computer-generated objects. In contrast, “virtual environments” (like Second Life) involve player interaction with other users, usually represented graphically by avatars. The two different contexts provoke different concerns and anxieties in relation to questions of violence generally, and sexualised violence against women in particular. The first type (video game violence) prompts questions about the effects on the player and on society: will virtual violence will lead to “actual” violence; does it de-sensitise the player to violence; does it result in (or reflect) a generalised increase in sexualised hostility towards women? In virtual environments, the concern is with the impact upon the victim; is it abusive or harmful when an avatar is assaulted?

Video game violence

It is indisputable that many video games depict extreme violence and highly sexualised images of women (Hayes, 2007; Ivory, 2006). Video games are overwhelmingly orientated to a male audience. Some researchers have identified a negative correlation between self-perception and game play among adolescent girls who play video games (Funk & Buchman, 1996, cited in Ivory, 2006). There is less agreement on the degree to which these aspects of gaming are problematic. Video games (played on either a console or a home computer) such as the Grand Theft Auto (GTA) series, allow the player to interact with a “game world”, with the player usually represented by a character in the game. In GTA, some aspects of this game-world have caused concern, including possibilities such as the player being “able to pick up a prostitute, have sex to replenish health, then kill her to take back the money spent”.² There is also an in-game advertisement for a made-up paedophile website (there is no actual link to a “real” website and no actual child pornography).³

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One way of approaching the question of “wrongness” in violent video games is through traditional philosophical approaches to ethics. For example, from a “utilitarian” ethical perspective, the question of whether any particular act or practice is wrong is assessed from a cost/benefit analysis—whether the overall costs to society outweigh the benefits (Waddington, 2007). Waddington suggested there are difficulties in this approach to video game violence, partly because of the lack of consistent evidence, to date, on either the benefits or costs of such violence. However a meta-analysis by Anderson and Bushman (2001) suggested otherwise. They found that exposure to violent video games, like exposure to violence on television and film, is significantly associated with heightened aggression. Moreover, there is a negative association between playing violent video games and “pro-social” behaviour (e.g., helping others). However, correlation does not prove causation. For example, people who are inclined to play more violent video games might already be more aggressive than others.

1 There are of course many other forms of violence against women involving the internet and computer technology; for example websites containing depictions of rape (Gossett & Byrne, 2002), online sexual harassment (Barak, 2005), and the use of social networking pages to spread malicious, often sexualised, rumours (especially for adolescents) (Chisolm, 2006).

2 It should be noted that GTA is one example of video games that involve sexual violence against women, others include Duke Nukem 3D and Japanese eroge or henti games including RapeLay where the protagonist stalks and rapes a mother and two daughters (Moore, 2009).

3 The developers modified the latest game in the series (GTA IV) for Australian release, removing some of the explicit sexual content.

Studies on “the costs” have almost exclusively focused on the impacts upon the player, specifically whether playing violent games increases the player’s risk of behaving aggressively. One “cost” factor that has not been studied extensively is the symbolic or social-psychological impact of witnessing, or even being aware of, the extent of violence against women in video games. The reaction against games such as GTA suggest that there is some symbolic harm felt in relation to these virtual representations, including among non-players. One might even suggest an analogy with the notorious Sam Newman “mannequin” incident on The Footy Show.⁴ Although no “real person” was physically assaulted, Newman’s actions clearly inflicted a kind of harm upon a number of women viewers and women involved in football. This incident demonstrates that harm can be affected symbolically, and that the impacts are real. In relation to “virtual rape”, MacKinnon states, “it is a virtual violation that passes back through the interface and attacks the person where it is real” (1998, p. 166).

Against the costs, in the utilitarian ethical schema, are the benefits. The most obvious “benefit” derived from playing video games is pleasure. A disturbing possibility is that it is precisely the performance of violence against women, and/or the sexual objectification of women, that some players find “pleasurable”; for them this is not a cost but a benefit (but see also Ivory, 2006, who suggested that male game reviewers and players may be less enthused by these depictions of women than game developers and marketers seem to assume). Among the vast array of violent games available for purchase, the degree of sexualisation in GTA may be part of the reason for its astonishing commercial success.⁵ As Hayes noted, video games can allow players to “project their hopes and desires onto the virtual character” (2007, p. 27). This raises a deeper question that a purely evidence-based approach, or for that matter the utilitarian approach to ethics, cannot deal with: Is pleasure itself always a legitimate benefit? Is this like saying, for example, that the “pleasure” a sexual offender gains should be considered seriously as a benefit of rape? This is clearly a conclusion that cannot be taken seriously in real life when assessing the ethics of the act, even if it holds true from the offender’s point of view (i.e., from some offenders’ perspectives, sexual gratification may be part of their motivation). Given that we would not accept this as a legitimate “benefit” of rape, this notion of pleasure cannot be accepted uncritically in relation to virtual violence either. In other words, it is not enough to simply state that playing games is pleasurable for the player as an argument for the “benefits” of gaming. In turn, this indicates that what is experienced as pleasurable about gaming is subjective and influenced by factors such as gender and cultural background (Hayes, 2007).

Beyond these individual-level considerations, video games are not outside culture in general, and they must be understood in their social context. Given the prevalence of sexualised and objectifying images of women in other cultural arenas, it really is not surprising that this should also be the case in video games. This suggests not that such depictions in video games be accepted or excused, but that the problem to be confronted is embedded culturally, structurally and socially. Violence and sexualised images in video games sells, leading some researchers to wonder whether the same kinds of investment in developing and marketing exciting non-violent video games could make them as profitable as violent ones (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). It also points to the possibility that while many games work to reinforce culturally dominant “scripts”, including those related to gender, they can also challenge them (Hayes, 2007).

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Another possible cause for concern is that violence in video games devalues the notion of wrongness in itself, in much the same way that counterfeit money devalues real money (Waddington, 2007). While the player knows the difference between game violence and real violence, it is nonetheless a simulation of real violence. As a simulation, it is not perceived as “wrong”, even if the act it simulates is. Thus, suggests Waddington, as technology enables the increasingly real simulation of actual events, and the line between real wrongs and simulated wrongs slowly erodes, so too does the very notion of wrongness itself.

Virtual environments

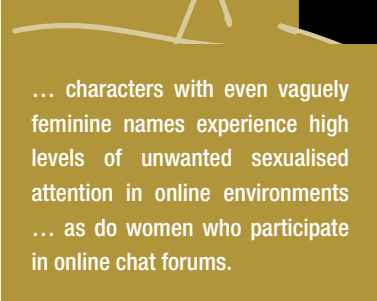
The first reported rape in “cyberspace”, discussed in a widely cited article by Dibble (1998), occurred in LambdaMOO, a text-based “multiple-user object-oriented” world. (For a detailed account of what occurred see the Dibble article available online). In short, one of the “players” used a sub-program to attribute actions to other characters in the world; some of these “actions” (described in text) were of a sexualised and violent nature, and were experienced as extremely upsetting and a violation by the players whose characters were involved, as well as

- 4 In the infamous episode, Newman had a female mannequin dressed in lingerie on the set, which he picked and handled in an aggressive manner. The mannequin was meant to represent a well-respected female football writer. Newman went on to denigrate the role of women in leadership positions in the AFL (Australian Football League). The episode sparked widespread public backlash.
- 5 On a more hopeful note, *The Age* newspaper ran a story (June 30, 2008) reporting that a fitness game for the Wii console had outsold GTA IV as the top-selling console game in Australia.

some of the other users in the room. Since this first reported incident, sexualised violence and abuse towards women (or at least, towards female-identified characters and avatars) is commonplace in virtual environments.

The responses to this online violence have been varied. To this author's knowledge no "real-life" legal action, criminal or legal, has been taken against any alleged perpetrators. One of the key questions asked by commentators is about the harm that is caused by virtual violence. Some commentators have been dismissive of the violence, distinguishing sharply between "virtual" and "real" violence, with a general attitude towards victims that they should not take it so seriously (e.g., MacKinnon, 1998). Some have suggested that the ability to commit virtual violence (not necessarily sexualised violence) in online environments can have a positive cathartic effect (De Zwart, 2008). There are links here with debates about whether viewing child pornography is engaging in paedophile behaviour. On this issue, the public has clearly accepted the connections and rejected the notion of "cathartic benefit" or as a way of preventing "real" abuse by a would-be perpetrator. Despite the dismissal and minimisation by some, there is a "real" element to virtual harm (see the following article by Jessica Wolfendale on virtual harm and attachment).

Avatars or characters with even vaguely feminine names experience high levels of unwanted sexualised attention in online environments (Suler & Phillips, 1998), as do women who participate in online chat forums (Döring, 2000). In what Döring (2000) termed the "victimization" account of women's online sexual experiences, "...we are dealing with online harassment, virtual rape, and cyberprostitution, whereby it is not just the women immediately involved who are harmed, but all women as a group are damaged through the reproduction and establishment of a sexist image of women" (p. 869). While it has long been noted that many women experience other online environments, such as discussion forums, as hostile and aggressive (Winter & Huff, 1996), Döring (2000) argued that some aspects of sexuality on the internet can be empowering for women, particularly in relation to exploring transgressive sexual practices. For some women, the internet is relatively safe compared to some "real life" social environments.



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Responding to online sexualised violence and harassment

Probably the most common way of responding to problematic online behaviour is for the moderators to intervene directly. Moderators (or "wizards") of these environments have a range of options available to respond to individual offenders. These options range across a continuum, from supportive to victim-blaming, that mirrors many real life responses of people in authority to victims of sexual violence. For example, John Suler's The Psychology of Cyberspace website <www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/badboys.html> has a lengthy discussion guide on what moderators can do to deal with offensive behaviours in online environments.⁶ The guide takes the problem of sexualised harassment seriously and makes a number of suggestions on how to deal with offenders. However, it has difficulty conceptualising the harm that unwanted sexualised interaction may cause, reflecting that the victim "may perceive harm where there really isn't much harm, or create situations in which others tend to mistreat them, perhaps even provoking abuse". This leads to a focus on the verification of harm rather than the harm itself. There is also the suggestion that the best response is for the victim to take self-protection measures. MacKinnon (1998) noted the historical societal reluctance to believe women's accounts of rape, but he appeared to see this as justified on the basis that a victim-centred definition of rape cannot account for "hypersensitive, insane, or mentally incompetent victims" (p. 167). He went on to suggest ways that the veracity of a "virtual" complaint can be checked.

Clearly, virtual environments are not immune to victim-blaming and other minimising responses to sexualised violence and harassment. There are other responses available to moderators which focus on the responsibility of the offender and safety of the victim, such as "muting" the offender so they cannot interact, completely disallowing any further participation from that user. This does have limitations, including the ability of the individual to simply sign in or register with a new username. These responses, however, do send a clear message the behaviour is unacceptable, will be responded to, and that the offender is responsible for the behaviour.

Online offenders

The anonymity afforded to perpetrators has been seen by some as a contributor to online sexualised violence (Barak, 2005; MacKinnon, 1998). While there is some level of anonymity in the virtual environment itself, most contemporary users would be increasingly aware that this is limited; individual users can be tracked by Internet Service Providers in many cases (whether an ISP is willing to do so is another matter, which also

⁶ Suler's website, <www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/psycyber.html>, is a very helpful introduction to life online. For a description of Second Life, see his blog <<http://psycyber.blogspot.com/>>

brings up the question of privacy of online users). It is not only the perception that one will not be “caught” that is said to contribute to the occurrence of virtual violence, but the notion that one is, like a tourist, on a kind of “moral holiday” (MacKinnon, 1998) that frees them from normal moral and legal constraints. This is especially so in the case of irregular visitors to a particular site; there is an element of unaccountability. Nonetheless, anonymity itself does not explain why the behaviour is committed, as if the “impulse” to commit this behaviour itself needs no explanation. Barak (2005) discussed the “online disinhibition effect” and argued that this leads offenders to act more “naturally,” but also noted that this may be especially powerful when combined with the overtly “masculine” atmosphere of some online forums. When this analysis is linked back to a broader culture of violence against women, it is not necessary to understand this “natural” tendency as biological or psychological, but rather as a social dynamic. This seems to offer a more satisfactory explanation as to why such behaviour is committed in the first place. Barak opted for a combined approach, suggesting that some environments may “actually elicit them [harassing behaviours] by providing an atmosphere in which harassers receive reinforcement to behave consistently with their SH [sexually harassing] proclivities” (p. 82).⁷ Regardless of the causes or motivations, most commentators agree that there are many aspects of online culture that condone or promote sexualised aggression towards women, and that addressing these cultural aspects are an integral part of prevention.

Summary

While research on sexualised violence against women in gaming and virtual environments has not generally kept up with the extent of its occurrence, there is a broad recognition that many problematic aspects of gendered relations in “real life” are reflected and sometimes intensified in various kinds of “virtual worlds”. The question of how to respond is complex, involving issues that parallel real life as well as problems that are unique to cyberspace and computer technologies. As it becomes increasingly clear that these practices and cultures of violence have symbolic and direct effects for many people, a growing body of research and theory will contribute to our understanding of how to respond to and prevent this distinctly contemporary manifestation of a long-standing problem of gendered injustice.

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7 The potential problem here is the notion of a “harasser” who is a “kind” of person, inherently (whether psychologically or biologically) inclined to harass. While I think Barak is right to insist on the importance of the online environment in enabling sexualised harassment, this idea of the “natural” harasser leaves out the offline cultural influences that are conducive to the desire to harass.