Language-GAME-Players:
Articulating the pleasures of 'violent' game texts

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Abstract

Young peoples' voices have been considered irrelevant or unreliable when it comes to discussing the influence and impact of their engagement with screen-mediated depictions of violence. Historically, such viewpoints have been derived from the controlled experimentation of modernist psychology, which constitutes the most sustained and prominent enquiries into the consequences of individual participation in, and viewing of, simulated violence. In espousing an impersonal approach, psychological research has opted not to demonstrate any understanding of the properties of the particular games or the medium its findings have been used to denigrate. Neither does its research possess broader awareness of the social dimensions of play or the productivity inherent in the practices of its surrounding cultures. This paper introduces findings taken from a two-year project that attempted to draw together what have essentially remained separate lines of inquiry – the critical and analytical scrutiny of Game Studies applied to understanding the pleasures of engagement with game violence. The aim of this research was to achieve a more contextual understanding of texts that utilise violence from the perspective of young people that opt to experience them as an entertainment form. In doing so, a range of qualitative methods were employed to encourage game players to present their viewpoints and offer a voice that is all too often absent from the 'one-way debate' attached to the representation of violence within games.

Author Keywords

videogame violence; audience research; game studies; psychological research

Introduction

When faced with extreme examples of our social imperfections, we have become too accustomed with the habitual condemnation of videogames as a fitting explanation for the debauched innocence of our young (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). As an active and growing community of Game Studies scholars, we have yet to truly respond and consider the foundations of such belief systems in our work. This paper seeks to instigate this process by presenting a selection of findings from a two-year funded project[i] that sought to gather game players' viewpoints on their experiences of simulated violence. For this project, players were also asked to evaluate their experiences in the context of the conjoined processes of "media effects" research and "politics of substitution" (Jenkins, 1992) that are provoked by and used to explain tragic events such as school shootings. While the media effects research tradition constitutes a daunting volume of continuous methodological intricacy and refinement, the present research was not prompted by a

desire to depose experimental methodologies as a source of knowledge generation. Instead, the present research was impelled by a strong sense of discomfort with the increasingly expansive nature of the word "violence" and the way it is unquestioningly and legitimately employed to express what is happening in games. This research was driven by an aim to explore what possibilities exist for detaching the discussion of videogames' complex employment and treatment of violent themes and imagery from a restricted and loaded lexical field . This took precedent over the desire to accomplish social betterment through establishing videogames as the root of "causation."

In the case of the capacity of media content to engender associations such as "the impetus for aggressive acts" (Geen, 1994, p. 158), experimental research is currently obliquely contested by accounts of the cultural value of videogames. Research has produced rich and varied examples of the social spaces of gaming (Newman, 2002; Klastrup, 2003) and the creativity attributed to participatory cultures that spontaneously form around various game texts (Burn & Schott, 2004; Schott & Burn, 2007). As part of its strategic boundary work, Game Studies has so far neglected the focus of social science research in favour of demarcating the epistemological distinctiveness of its analytical frameworks and the appropriateness of its methodological treatment of its hybrid medium (Frasca, 1999; Aarseth, 2001).

Other interesting tactics for challenging the notion that "today's youth are more likely to pull a gun than make a fist" (Glassner, 1999, p. xiv) as a result of their investment in games can be found in the work of videogame-inspired practitioners such as Brody Condon. Condon's work in particular has explored the terrain between the "fiction of games and authentic collective experiences" (Mattes & Mattes, 2008). In particular, he re-examines "sites" of trauma (for example, Columbine, Waco, and 9/11), the nature of post-traumatic stress and "the fantasy and fabrication that go with it" (Condon, 2007, p. 86). In his work *Adam Killer* (1999), a partial response to the Columbine massacre, digital avatars of his friend Adam are murdered *en masse* in a kaleidoscopic rampage highlighting the absurdity of digital bloodlust while offering a commentary on the "intense separation of media images of trauma from their original context and meaning" (ibid).

Despite the legitimate way such works function to offer an alternative perspective from experimental research practices, there still remains a need for research that applies the various lines of thinking exhibited by generations X and Y to achieve a better understanding of the playing experiences of "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) in a more scrutinized and resistant climate. State-driven legislation, news media, and advocacy groups selectively utilise effects research in order to express concern for what they believe to be an uncritical and non-resistant market of young people who, once exposed to videogame violence, develop aggressive thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Gentile et al, 2004). Young people actively engaging with these texts inevitably become stigmatized by the stereotypes implicit in effects research and codified within "protective" legislation as either anti-social, unintelligent, or non-creative (Morris, 2004). Despite forming the readership of popular culture, young people are often denied a voice by "authorities and opinion makers" (Thompson, 1998). Condemnation of the pleasures derived from games is legitimised by the supportive outcomes of effects research.

The problem remains that such research is not designed to constitute a textual interrogation of the content of texts of fascination or the participatory activities of its surrounding cultures. Likewise, public discussion of videogames fails to acknowledge diverse taste cultures, thus effecting its evaluation and omitting consideration of the motivations guiding, and individual choices employed by, players that engage with games. Game Studies offers such a framework for exploring the representational dimensions that might be crucial to the appeal of games, and how the experience of play is dependent upon players' existing interests and preoccupations (Eskelinen, 2001; Juul, 2003; Brand & Knight, 2005).

Re(articulating) Games and Game Playing

The denigration of games by social commentators and advocacy groups is not easily dismissed as a rite of passage faced by each new medium. Each new strain also fortifies a generational rhetoric that is being employed in discussions of young people. This diverse group is routinely characterized and "spoken for" (Thompson, 1998). Amongst the players consulted for this research (aged 14-18), similar concerns were articulated when one young male stated: "As gamers the only real place we express our view would be the net, but you can't have one gamer representative because there are so many of us and we are not an organisation, we are not a club." In order to therefore encourage an exchange of ideas amongst game players, the research was conducted during weekly game clubs that provided the project with regular access to participants and permitted exploration of a range of game texts. These game clubs functioned to permit direct and longitudinal observations of game play and also effortlessly allowed the initiation of discussions around issues such as preference, motivation, and reception. More structured group discussions and individual interviews were also employed throughout the process. Five schools throughout the Waikato and Bay of Plenty regions of New Zealand's North Island granted the project access to cohorts of students studying Information Technology and Media Studies. In total, sixty-one students (53 male and 8 female) participated in the research.

This research project addressed the contrasting intentions dividing the research interests of Social Science and Humanities scholars. Social Science research, in this context, is characterised as having spilled out of television "effects debates," propagating critiques of games for their amplification of the negative psychological, moral and behavioural effects of television violence. While humanities-oriented Game Studies research is characterised as obliquely contesting correlation studies through asserting the cultural value of videogames. Rarely do these different discourses and perspectives encounter each other head on. As part of its strategic boundary work, Game Studies has so far neglected the focus of Social Science research in favour of demarcating the epistemological distinctiveness of its analytical frameworks and methodologies as most appropriate to its hybrid medium. The broader aims of the research project introduced here were to address the way young people that opt to engage with games containing violent content, have been given few opportunities to articulate the appeal, function and pleasures of their everyday gaming practices thus permitting more localised and contextual accounts of game culture. Consideration given to sustaining social order and the preservation of human values by advocacy groups and social commentators is not undermined but addressed accordingly by seeking to offer a more representative account of how young people serve as active participants and actors within game cultures, rather than simply passive victims of media manipulation. To achieve this, a combination of methodological techniques were applied to assist players articulate their

experiences, perceptions and interpretations of their game playing practices. The game club context enabled the project to explore how different conflict-focused games elicit different motivations and pleasures, permitting examination of how different texts present new challenges, provoke different reactions and demand new behaviours. In addition it also sought to account for the way game texts and technologies intersect with social lives and how conflict-focused games are positioned within a broader mediascape of assorted cross-media genres and inter-textual references.

The obvious difficulty faced by young game players when asked to articulate and discuss their views on whether games are considered violent, and what that actually means, is well summarised by Goodman: "If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can I say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described" (1978, p. 3). In asking the young players consulted during the research process to articulate what constitutes a game experience, we immediately enter the world of discourse encountering the frequent use of words such as "people," "kill," "shoot," and "violence." This constituted a ritual of exchange that saw players employ a restricted vocabulary of description. By virtue of Wittgenstein's (1953) concept of meaning as derivative of social use, the labelling of what occurs in computer games as "violence" has become "culturally sedimented" (Schutz, 1962). As Kenneth Gergen argues: "If forms of understanding are sufficiently long-standing, and there is sufficient univocality in their usage, they may acquire a veneer of objectivity, the sense of being literal as opposed to metaphoric" (1994, p. 49). In attempting to expand the range of voices encircling the practices of game players, it was necessary to employ a constructionist sensitivity towards players' custom of seemingly endorsing the narrative practices of their detractors. It was whether such accounts held shared meaning that was of interest.

This paper's focus is on the way players came to comprehend their playing experiences. In particular it considers whether it is appropriate to categorize what occurs in games as "violence". It is important to note that the arguments presented in this paper are derived from a range of encounters that together possessed a connotative quality. The findings were rarely presented as discrete expressions. Instead, what is discussed here often reflects an assembling of different experiences with the same participants over time that emerged from witnessing play, paying heed to conversations and participation in collaborative play. Furthermore, this assemblage also includes the use of Game Studies approaches to understanding the form and nature of game texts in analyses of how particular games invite, demand, and permit different forms of conflict-based engagement. Players were also part of this process, as they were invited to participate by evaluating the extent to which our analytical accounts were representative of the issues discussed and considered throughout the research process.

Assessing the Naturalistic Modality Orientation of Videogames

Jesper Juul was quick to point out that "games contain a built-in contradiction", referring to the way we take the interactivity of videogames to mean "free-form" play devoid of constraints. Yet, in playing videogames we "choose to limit our options by playing … with fixed rules" (2003, p. 43). In this way games provide context and meaning for the actions that players engage with. Players themselves were quick to articulate this when evaluating their practices, as one

participant noted:

> A story, especially a good one, usually creates a situation of conflict then resolves it … They tend to be a mixture of puzzle solving and conflict resolution, with violence often being the means of resolution … A game conversation, though, at the moment, is pretty much "pick the right option," and is thus not only boring, but highly linear. A violent situation is much more easily modeled in such a way that it is highly nonlinear, and so that a huge variety of novel tactics can be employed to arrive at the desired goal (player comments on the aims of the research project).

A consistent and popular game choice during the data collection phase of the project was *Resistance: Fall of Man* (Insomniac Games): an R16-rated, Playstation 3 game. The game is a first-person shooter (FPS) fantasy science-fiction game, set in an alternative history that erases the Great Depression, the rise of Nazi Germany, and World War II. Instead, it portrays the rise of the Chimera, a fictional alien race. The game packaging addresses players with the enticement: "When Russia closed their borders, we feared they were developing a weapon of unparalleled power. The truth was far worse …" It is revealed during the course of the game that the Chimera are extraterrestrial in origin, and increase their numbers by infecting humans with a "mutagenic virus." When participants discussed games such as *Resistance: Fall of Man*, they too revealed the tensions inherent within the hybrid modality of games. Accounts of the experience shifted variably between encounters with the "prior" of the narrative context and the "present" of its realisation. In doing so, players variously acknowledged the constant negotiation between *traces* of the "representational" as they are subsumed within, and evoked by "orientational" and "presentational" truths of the game (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

More prominent than the suggestion of objective truth, the orientational function of text serves to address the player, situating them within its particular dramatic modality. The exhortation to "be" or "become" highlights the imperative mood of games requiring the player to assent to the demands of the game and its game world. The concept of presentational truth allows us to understand how the text is true to its genre as distinct from its represented world. Thus, the "creative mutation" that is digital games is perceived partially as constituting a fictive space that contains a range of semiotic resources that corroborate *an* understanding of combat, situated along an "axis of knowing" that determines the flow and force of events. Within this space a subtle blurring occurs, in which the imperative of the game and the modality of the FPS genre often confounds broader knowledge of objective truths that inhere the narrative back story. A simple example of this is the way players picked up how *Resistance Fall of Man* elicits and privileges advancement, momentum, and incursion rather than the acts of occupation and colonisation in its assemblage, as these are more suited to the rules of the game system over the simulation of war.

Players' views revealed an occupation with more immediate encounters with *existents*, actors, and settings (Chatman, 1978) that are programmed, not with "hostile intents" (Juul, 2001), but to obstruct the player's progress towards a winning state. In doing so, players' engagements with the player-to-game settings (such as in *Resistance: Fall of Man*) are typically articulated not as actions against discernable victims, understood as "lives worth living" (Proctor, 1995), but schematic reasoning appropriate to their particular orientation in a territory of scripts

and rules. This was expressed austerely by one player as: "When you're killing people in a game you quickly start seeing them as just computer-like players." Indeed, game history has shown us that it has not always been necessary for game players to engage with game narratives that utilise anthropomorphic representations, *Missile Command* (Atari) being a case in point. What constitutes a "person," while understood by players, does not appear to be applied in such contexts irrespective of the representational attributes of the medium and the drive towards photo-realism employed by the game industry.

In making this point and distancing play from a "concept of person as a purely moral concept" (Tooley, 1973), it is important to note that reference is being made here to discussions with players concerning exclusively war-themed or first-person shooter games, in contrast to, say, the role-playing genre. Role-playing games often contain relationships that pre-exist the player (as protagonist) that conform more strongly to conventional narrative, thus containing greater information on character situation, personal histories, and personalities (Carr et al, 2006). In contrast, *Resistance: Fall of Man* sweeps the player up in a brutal Darwinian struggle for survival against a superior but unknown race, thus forming part of long history of fictional works by authors such as G.T. Chesney (1871), W. Le Queux (1894), and H.G. Wells (1898) that have expressed human insecurities concerned with invasion.

Observing the game play in *Resistance: Fall of Man* underlined the intensity of the battle sequences that offer little time for players to linger or explore alternative readings. The array of multiple resources or forces operating upon the player initiate a sentiment expressed by the game's publicity, namely: "Never underestimate humanity's will to survive." Game semantics (narrative and plot) and syntax (oppositional forces and positions) combine to initiate a response that, regardless of "respawning," calls into play a deep human predisposition to galvanize the "forward thrust of life" (Rogers, 1961).

The key concern for players, as exhibited through game play, was avatar preservation rather than action that could be interpreted as premeditated malice or cruelty. As one player commented: "I kinda do whatever needs to be done, not more." With only transitory refuge and a gun, the game conditions trigger constant movement and repositioning whilst under fire and under threat from Chimera raids. One of the players stipulated that "there's violence and then there's cruelty, which I believe are two different things … I try to avoid cruel games." He went on to state that: "I don't like the idea of, you know, torture, rape, pillage, you know the whole … I like the idea of killing but not the idea of cruelty, like in a cruel manner." For many players, war games were perceived as a form of sanctioned bloodletting that is "legislated for by the highest civil authorities" and frequently obtains "the consent of the vast majority of the population" (Bourke, 1999, p. 1). War games were presented as the most preferable and moral mode of engaging with the concept of killing and dying as opposed to games that offer contexts of inner-city gang violence or entice the player to "become" sociopathic.

Fighting to Survive

The visual tropes constructed and employed by the developers of *Resistance: Fall of Man* clearly evoke Steven Spielberg's resuscitation of filmic war re-enactment found in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), in which he shifted the genre into "new territories of verisimilitude" (Sturken, 1997, p.

42). Spielberg applies a post-Vietnam representational logic that reflects "disillusionment with the heroic and celebratory representational practices of earlier Hollywood war films" (Owen, 2002, p. 259). In making *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg adopted the sensibility that "war is no longer about a greater good but becomes intensely personal. Kids in combat are simply fighting to survive, fighting to save the guys right next to them" (1998, p. 68). The audience of *Saving Private Ryan* are sutured into the horrors of combat (Nelson, 2000) via a long-standing characteristic of games – the point-of-view perspective. In the film's opening Omaha beach-landing sequence, defeating the enemy is secondary to basic humanistic concerns. The influence of *Saving Private Ryan* is evident in other games, like the Spielberg-produced *Medal of Honor* (DreamWorks Interactive) and *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward), in which emphasis upon the "lone wolf," once typical of the FPS genre (for example, *Wolfenstein 3D*, id Software), is displaced in favor of preservation of self and "unit."

The visual and auditory compositions of *Saving Private Ryan* allowed audiences to experience the carnage of war, and its various horrible deaths, through the immediacy of hand-held camera work, blood-splattering on the camera lens, and temporal and auditory distortion signifying both mortar concussion and shocked detachment. The glorification of war is firmly suppressed in favour of a "new kind of dying … uncut and uncensored" (Spielberg, 1998, p. 68). The discursive practices of cinema as manifest in post-Vietnam war cinema is, however, adept at coupling moments of sensory intensity with deeper moments of reflection on the trauma of war, probing the "tormented lost soul, the permanently damaged survivor of a nihilistic hell too terrible to be put into words" (Holden, 1999, p.12). *Resistance: Fall of Man* may immerse players in the encounters of conflict, but it does not offer the same level of gruesome spectacle of fallen men, injured or dying. Voyeuristic spectatorship is exchanged for an onus on the player to endure and survive its fast-paced, frenetic, and hazardous spaces.

Players did, however, make references to other game titles during discussions, such as the R18-rated game *F.E.A.R.* (Monolith Productions)[ii] which offers players what Kingsepp, applying Bahktin's work, calls "carnivalesque death". This is death that highlights "the bloody, the gory and the grotesque" (2003, p. 2-3). Through incorporating "reflex" or "bullet time," a mode of play that simulates John Woo's tea house shootout in *Hard Boiled* and was popularized by the *Matrix*, the game world of *F.E.A.R.* is decelerated, allowing the player the opportunity to observe otherwise imperceptible events such as the trajectory of bullets. While this creates a tactical advantage for the player during encounters, it also emphasizes the corporeality of that encounter. Doherty has argued that, "far from being horrifying and repulsive … war on screen is always exhilarating" (1998, p. 69). Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien (1990) similarly describes the "guilty pleasure" of the war aesthetic as cited by Owen: "For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat … It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not" (Owen, 2002, p. 87). Players appear to share something of this sentiment, as violence is genuinely considered morally abhorrent yet, when translated as an entertainment form, its status as an "authentic fake" (Eco, 1986) or a "thicket of unreality" positioned between the player and the "facts of life" (Boorstin, 1992) offers distinct pleasures that are embraced and revered as thrilling, intriguing, and compelling. *F.E.A.R.* possesses a generic hybridity (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985) that purposefully combines the distinctive stylistic flourishes of action films ("defeating the enemy with style," according to *F.E.A.R.* developer Craig Hubbard) with the accentuated visceral nature and "pleasurable tensions" (Tudor, 2002) associated with both

Western and Japanese horror, respectively.

A further exception to the rule and example of "carnavalesque death" can be found in the FPS game *Soldier of Fortune* (Raven Software), in which character models were made up of individual body parts, permitting the dismemberment of its existents. Players are given the power to make a target's head explode, shoot off limbs, eviscerate intestines, and incite the performance of a painful death from a shot to the groin. In addition, such detail also permits the player to disarm existents with a shot to the hand, forcing them to cower and surrender. None of the participants in the present study cited this game, most likely due to its age (as it was released in 2000), but also because of the limited appeal of its game play and tactical sophistication to reviewers, thus prohibiting its longevity. Such an example reinforces the extensiveness of developers' utilization of conflict as *ludus* or *paidia*, its aesthetic treatment of virtual combat and, in the case of war-gaming, the "obsession with historical fidelity, with a perfect rendering" (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 48) contained within a simulacrum.

When such textual detail is exhibited in virtual combat (as discussed with reference to *F.E.A.R.*), where enemies stumble backwards having sustained a shot to the shoulder or are felled by a shot to the leg, it also serves to reconfirm the players' embodied presence as they witness the impact and accuracy of their aim. Players articulated the experience less often as a desire for carnage and blood lust, but rather as a sense of agency during their game play experiences. Common to "games of progression" (Juul, 2002) such as action-adventure and FPS games, designers typically attempt to obscure the manner in which the "player's primary role is to realize pre-existing structure of events" (King & Krzywinska, 2003, p. 109). This is more often than not achieved by adding what Adams (2002) has labeled "strange and wasteful design", referring to exploration of spaces that contain scheduled reinforcement such as additional ammunition and health packs. Returning to sense of agency as it is experienced in the revisionism of *Resistance: Fall of Man*, character health was also identified as a relevant aspect of strategic thinking during game play. Player realization that partial health-bar depletion (signifying avatar injury) would automatically refill after a short pause subsequently influenced approaches to play (for example, employing the sequenced behavior of attack-withdraw-pause). However, it also became apparent that enemies shared the same quality, thus giving them a persistent attribute that created greater challenge and reinforced the significance of player decision-making.

In witnessing carnivalesque deaths that are more protracted and typically reserved for the "superhero of the American monomyth" (Shelton & Jewett, 2002, p.6), it is plausible to argue that the status of enemies is raised, thus undermining the earlier argument of the existent as simply an obstacle. However, observations of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward) revealed how it not only employed confirmatory visual signifiers of player actions, such as blood spraying and staining, but that such textual detail could be experienced in a detached fashion during players' use of long-range sniper rifles. Even so, players highlighted instances of how sensory immersion is ruptured by reassertion of the "gameness" of the game in the instant where existents disappear from the screen before our eyes. Kingsepp (2003, 2007), when discussing *Medal of Honor*, makes the same observation in describing the event as "postmodern death" – similar to Baudrillard's (1995) notion of a "clean" war, owing to its highly sanitized media representation of death. Reconfirming players' articulation of the experience of gaming that

illustrated a folding and unfolding (Deleuze, 1988) of representational, orientational, and presentational forces, the imperative drive of the game is reaffirmed by clearing up obsolete existents rather than have the player wade through virtual corpses suggestive of an excessive slaughter. In doing so, the game's "flow state" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) preserves the fragile illusion of the authenticity of a guerilla warfare experience in the face of its improbable scenarios and its over-reliance and utilization of existents as obstacles.

Resistance to Fall of Man

Rendering of authenticity occurs in distinct areas of games – frequently weaponry or environments – reinforcing the collage of the ludic, fictitious, and historical at play in these multimodal texts. Interestingly, in terms of the focus of the project, players' preference for *Resistance: Fall of Man* also coincided with the Church of England's objection to Sony's use of in-game, created footage of both the interior and exterior of Manchester Cathedral. The Bishop of Manchester, the Right Reverend Nigel McCulloch, was quoted in the media as having stated that: "For a global manufacturer to re-create one of our greatest cathedrals with photo-realistic quality and then encourage people to have gun battles in the building is beyond belief and highly irresponsible" (BBC News). Sony were directly accused of contributing to the city's "gun crime problem" by the Bishop who, in saying so, also endorsed the scientific position that the "debate over whether media violence has an effect is over" (Anderson, 2004, p.114). The assumption here is that the "effect" denotes direct imitation of "violent acts" and its further extension to particular locations. Sony's response, posted on the Church of England website, inevitably privileged the fictional quota of the game in arguing that they "do not accept that there is any connection between contemporary issues of 21st century Manchester and a work of science fiction in which a fictitious 1950's Britain is under attack by aliens" (Reeves, President, SCEE).

Media coverage of the debate confounded matters further with misleading reports framing the game as a "computerized scene of mass murder" (BBC News Reporter, Mark Simpson) that included inaccurate accounts of the game ("for any house of God, to be used as a context for a game about *killing people* is offensive," Bishop of Manchester, BBC News, *emphasis added*). Here we find a common source of irritation for game players and a dominant "language game" (Lyotard, 1984) effecting the perception of games – that of determinism based upon misreading of the text. Highly public, yet surface level, reading of the text was condemned by players for over-emphasizing the relevance of a single facet of the experience. Institutional objections to *Resistance: Fall of Man* were perceived as "missing the point," as players interpreted developers' use of the cathedral and the demise of religion as effectively illustrating the downfall of civilized society and culture in a war ravaged landscape (irrespective of players failing to recognize Manchester Cathedral as a faithfully replicated space). The debate was also perceived by players as serving only to heighten the significance of what is essentially a diminutive component of the broader tour de force that takes the player all over the North of England. Common to other contentious game titles, it was considered that a proportionally insignificant part of the game had yet again made the game infamous. Speaking more broadly about what games offer, one player sought to highlight the depth of texts in comparison to the lack of penetration demonstrated by critical readings, as he argued:

"They present it to be quite um … it looks like it's going to be all slaughter …

yep, a blood fest, but when you get introduced into the game there's characters more, there's plot, mainly introduced in the first clips (cut scenes). You're introduced to more people, you try and work out the plot as the game goes on … so, once you've actually played the game you find there's more to it."

Conclusion

There is a necessity to acknowledge not only the participation of "authoritative voices" commenting on the nature of violence and its relationship with gaming, but also to accept and listen to the voices of game players. It also needs to be noted that they, too, are caught in the "language games" of the social sciences and are constrained by these. They are limited by a commonly accepted vocabulary and restricted by the expansive use of the idea of violence. What this fails to account for is the intensities that players experience, involving a complex dynamic between other mediated experiences such as contemporary cinema, the pleasures of game spectacle and special effects, as well as the intensities of the game performance itself that offers many obstacles for the player to overcome. Public perception of game players as "unintelligible" could be largely attributed to language that players had at their disposal. Players' viewpoints were wedded to dominant public discourse surrounding gaming that often proved to be ill informed and incapable of capturing the content, nature, and scope of gaming experiences.

Reflexive weaknesses suggestive of a "naïve gaze" (Bourdieu, 2000) were, however, resolved through the performative potency of witnessing and engaging with players as they encountered and experienced the challenges assembled by developers' and players' exploitation of the various forces of genre, historical knowledge, and the competitive state of gaming. The research was able to highlight the richness of players' taste practices in terms of what they were capable of acquiring from an experience with a single game text, yet there was also evidence of self-imposed taste boundaries and a dominant mode of appreciation, referring to a preference for the aesthetic of historical warfare. Even within a distinctive genre the paths to pleasure remained varied and intricate. Most importantly for this work, it has been possible to begin the process of "freeing" players from the damaging effects of unthinkingly employing a ritualised discourse suggestive of an attachment to games founded on the desire and intent to kill and maim other lives.

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[ii] The project only permitted the playing of R16 games during game clubs, but participants inevitably cited and discussed experience with other games that have been classified as R18.