



Moral positioning in video games and its relation with dispositional traits: The emergence of a social dimension



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ABSTRACT

Over the past 30 years, video games have become an important part of contemporary global entertainment and media. One relevant issue among the possible video game effects on behavior is related to violence and aggression tendencies. The debate on this topic is still open and highlights the importance of considering possible mediating factors, such as moral positioning (e.g., preferences for evil/good characters/choices in video games), empathy, and personality of video gamers. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between moral positioning of video gamers and personality traits, aggression tendencies, and social abilities. 224 players completed an online survey including ad hoc questions about their preferences for evil/good characters and choices in video games and several validated questionnaires to assess their dispositional traits. Results showed that gamers' preferences for playing evil characters were negatively associated with extraversion, agreeableness, and empathy. Aggression was only partially correlated with evil moral positioning; specifically, in terms of physical aggression. Moreover, evil moral positioning in video games did not predict aggressive tendencies, but partially predicted low levels of empathic ability in players. The findings are discussed with reference to a social conception of video game play and to possible implications for the educational context.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 30 years, video games have become an important part of contemporary global entertainment and media. The increasing number of video gamers has lead researchers to focus their attention on video game effects on behavior. One relevant issue is related to the effects of violent video games on aggression.

Despite a great number of publications discussing this topic, it remains complex and characterized by substantial uncertainty. A recent article from *The Guardian* (Etchells, 2013) well summarized the current situation of the phenomenon. On the one hand, the media still identify video games as a possible contributory cause for real-life violent and criminal events (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Bartholow, Bushman, & Sestir, 2006; Bushman & Anderson, 2002; Hollingdale & Greitemeyer, 2013; Norris, 2004). On the other hand, the literature is filled more so with intense debates

(Anderson et al., 2010; Bushman, Rothstein, & Anderson, 2010; Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson & Kilburn, 2010) and contradictory results (Ferguson, San Miguel, Garza, & Jerabeck, 2012; Markey, Markey, & French, 2014; Willoughby, Adachi, & Good, 2012).

Specifically, research has found that violent video games seem to increase aggressive behaviors in players, at least in the short-term (Bartholow, Sestir, & Davis, 2005; Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014; Schutte & Malouff, 1988); promote aggressive representations of others, such as hostile attribution bias (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Börsche, 2010; Moller & Krahé, 2009); and generate negative emotions (anger) that can persist in the player after the game and influence his or her real life behaviors (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Carnagey, Anderson, & Bushman, 2007). However, other studies have not found significant results for increases in aggression and anger (Unsworth, Devilly, & Ward, 2007), and some have shown that the effects disappear in the long-term, especially when one accounts for other personal or environmental causes for aggressive behaviors (Ferguson et al., 2012).

These inconsistent findings can be explained in several ways ranging from poor research design and invalid measurements to publication bias (Ferguson, 2007a, 2007b; Markey & Markey, 2010). For example, some researchers have suggested that

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different types of violence and aggression should be distinguished among video games content (Ferguson, 2010; Kontour, 2009), which suggests that certain violent representations are not necessarily linked to antisocial behaviors (e.g., there may be a difference between cartoon violence that takes place in a funny, unrealistic environment and a virtual representation of realistic criminal conduct). Similarly, situational factors, such as identity and proximity of the game opponent, influence aggressive tendencies (Williams & Clippinger, 2002).

It is also possible that these findings have been less than consistent because researchers have not always considered possible mediating factors (Matthews, 2015). In this sense, the video game player is not to be conceived as a machine that automatically repeats the behaviors it sees. On the contrary, the player actively enters the game with his or her own characteristics and elaborates the complex information received from the game. For example, researchers indicate that personality can guide media preferences (Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2005), which suggests that people seek out entertainment that reflects and reinforces aspects of their personalities (Rentfrow, Goldberg, & Zilca, 2011). In this sense, dispositional aspects could lead video gamers to choose violent video games or to protect themselves from the violent media exposure.

1.1. Morality, empathy, and personality as mediators of the effects of violent video games

An important mediating factor, which has recently emerged in literature, is *morality*, conceived as the moral characterization of the avatar as it is expressed by the game narrative (Gabbadini, Riva, Andrighetto, Volpato, & Bushman, 2013; Schulzke, 2010; Sicart, 2009; Weaver & Lewis, 2012). According to Funk, Buchman, Jenks, and Bechtoldt (2003), moral evaluation in video games is an automatic process that is triggered when the situation requires that certain normative beliefs guide behavioral choices. Dodge and Schwartz (1997) stated that the moral evaluation of the appropriateness of violent behaviors includes the social information processing stages. According to these stages, players must first selectively attend to and interpret the appropriate cues, then determine their goals for the situation and how to best attain those goals.

Indeed, video game players often reflect about moral content that is expressed in the games (Pohl, 2008), and they feel a real sense of guilt when they perform immoral actions in these virtual environments (Grizzard, Tamborini, Lewis, Wang, & Prabhu, 2014; Hartmann, Toz, & Brandon, 2010). Also, pro-social content in video games can promote abilities linked to moral behavior, such as empathy (Gentile et al., 2009; Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014; Greitemeyer, Osswald, & Brauer, 2010; Velez, 2015). Happ, Melzer, and Steffgen (2013) recently investigated the effect of the moral positioning of characters on players' behaviors. Participants played the same game (*Mortal Kombat vs. Dc Universe*) using a violent evil character (Joker) or a violent good character (Superman). Not only did the Superman players not show effects in their aggressive tendencies, but also they outperformed the others in a pro-social task. Similarly, in an experiment by Gitter, Ewell, Guadagno, Stillman, and Baumeister (2013), players killed virtual zombies in a pro-social and morally justified context (protecting a friend) or in a morally ambiguous context (just kill as many zombies as possible). Participants in the first condition showed lower short-term aggression and higher levels of pro-social cognition.

In general, moral evaluation is influenced by the individual's affective repertoire, including empathy (Hoffman, 2000). Empathy is a complex construct that includes both cognitive (perspective-taking) and affective responsiveness to the perceived

emotional state of another. Empathy and attitudes toward violence are correlated components of moral evaluation where strong pro-violence attitudes are associated with low levels of empathy (Funk et al., 2003). Further, empathy is needed to transform moral standards into emotionally charged cognitions, which influence behavior, the product of moral evaluation. By investigating game preferences and empathy in the video game context, Barnett et al. (1997) found that adolescents who preferred violent games had lower empathy scores.

Attitude toward violence is another important component of moral evaluation. Among individuals who attribute hostile intent to another when a situation is ambiguous, positive attitudes toward violence may encourage them to act in an aggressive manner (Velicer, Huckel, & Hansen, 1989). Researchers have found that aggressive gamers appear more likely to appreciate violent video games, although violence did not improve their enjoyment during game play (Przybylski, Ryan, & Rigby, 2009). Additionally, impulsive and aggressive gaming styles or the preference for violent video games often results in low empathy, low agreeableness, and high aggression tendencies (Hartmann et al., 2010; Hollingdale & Greitemeyer, 2013; Sukeena, Moore, & Minear, 2013; Van Schie & Wiegman, 1997).

Not only individual dispositions are associated with preference for violent video games, but also several researchers have suggested that the personality traits may mediate media violence effects (Ferguson, Colwell, Mlačić, Milas, & Mikloušić, 2011; Ferguson et al., 2008). In particular, Markey and Markey (2010) suggested that a simultaneous combination of several Five-Factor Model traits, including high neuroticism (e.g., easily upset, angry, depressed, emotional, etc.), low agreeableness (e.g., little concern for others, indifferent to others feelings, cold, etc.), and low conscientiousness (e.g., break rules, do not keep promises, act without thinking, etc.) are more powerful mediators of violent video games.

Based on these statements, as first we assume that video gamers actually have preferences for morality positioning. That is, being moral in part relates to individual dispositions, so that video gamers do not choose to play as good or evil randomly. For this reason, we first considered that some players may have a preference for the evil characters or play, while others may have preferences for the good ones. We investigated morality positioning through four ad hoc questions and we analyzed the consistency in measuring a single construct.

Then, we expected to replicate the findings of previous research by carrying out a cross-sectional study. Specifically, the study aims to test the following hypotheses:

Hp1. A stronger evil moral positioning in video games is associated with video gamers' lower empathy.

Hp2. A stronger evil moral positioning in video games is associated with higher aggressive attitudes.

Hp3. A stronger evil moral positioning in video games is associated with personality dispositions of video gamers in terms of high neuroticism, low agreeableness, and low conscientiousness.

To date, no research attempts have explicitly investigated the relationships between personality correlates of players and their moral positioning in video game narratives. In recent years, moral choice has become an increasingly popular plot mechanism in video game play (Weaver & Lewis, 2012) and, according to our opinion, such an attempt is important; precisely, recent research has investigated the effects of evil/good playing experimental conditions on behavior (Happ et al., 2013); however, according to our

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