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"That was so mean :D" – Playful virtual violence and the pleasure of transgressing intersecting emotional spaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how virtual violence in computer games is used to enact the pleasure of transgression. It draws on theories of violence, virtuality, play, and space, combining them with an ethnographic perspective on pleasure as enacted emotional experience. I will analyze communicative emotional practices, observed in gaming videos on YouTube as well as during participant observation in online multiplayer games and in qualitative interviews, to come to a better understanding of the emotional experiences enacted when players transgress feeling rules within intersecting emotional spaces between games and everyday life.

1. Introduction

Gronkh drives with his avatar to his next mission in Grand Theft Auto 5 (GTA5). He parks his car and walks his avatar slowly towards his destination, when a computer-controlled character crosses his path. The pedestrian, a Hispanic woman, hesitates, looks at Gronkh's avatar, apologizes for getting into his way, and proceeds down the sidewalk. Gronkh has his avatar follow her and then suddenly, with an exaggerated gesture, he slaps the woman on the back of her head. In a rather grotesque animation, the woman's hat flies off and she crashes face-down on the sidewalk. While his avatar is throwing the punch, Gronkh and his best friend Sarazar (who is sitting next to Gronkh watching his gameplay) already start laughing. "Well, she was unfriendly," Gronkh remarks with a smile and laughs again. Then he continues the game as usual, moving on to his next mission.[1]

This scene is part of Gronkh's Let's Play video series on one of the most popular video games of the last decade: Grand Theft Auto 5. Let's Play Videos are a YouTube genre that has grown immensely popular in recent years. On YouTube, the audience watches a recording of the player's screen while she or he is playing a video game and commenting on the gameplay in an entertaining manner. Every day, these entertainers upload an episode of mostly between 15 and 30 min until they have played through the game. Gronkh is one of the most popular Let's Players in Germany. This episode, for example, was clicked (meaning: was at least partly viewed) by more than 1 million viewers, has more than 11,000 likes, and was commented on more than 2000 times. Many of these comments actually refer to the situation described above. Accompanied by emoticons such as ':D' (for a grinning smile) or descriptions of 'having a laughing fit' the comments emphasize how funny this moment was for the viewers. One writes: "I was rolling on the floor laughing … that was so mean :D". In this sequence, a particular pleasure becomes visible: the pleasure of breaking social and emotional norms, the pleasure of transgression.

In the following, I discuss examples such as this one from an ethnographic perspective. Ethnographic approaches have long been established as an important part of the analysis of computer games (see for example Boellstorff, 2008; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2006, 2012). However, ethnographic studies have rarely touched on violence in computer games. Thus, this paper's key contribution is to demonstrate how ethnographic approaches to emotional practices can be applied for a better understanding of playful virtual violence and of the pleasures enacted through this practice. First, I clarify the concept of 'playful virtual violence' as the basis for my analysis. Secondly, I introduce ethnographic methods of analyzing emotional practices in the context of computer games that allow for an understanding of playful virtual violence as a particular form of doing pleasure. In the main section 1 give empirical examples of how the pleasure of transgression is enacted through playful virtual violence in video games. This then

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/embed/acwF4TxjWdg?start=1190%26end=1210
This is a link for a YouTube video with the time frame relevant for this description. The original YouTube videos and video comments referred to in this paper are in German. All translations have been done by the author and aim to convey the meanings of the sometimes unusual expressions in the German original.

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leads me to the final section, in which I ask how the pleasure of transgression can be better understood as process of breaking feeling rules within intersecting emotional spaces between games and everyday life.

It is important to note that this perspective intentionally contrasts the countless studies on possible effects of 'violent video games' on their players (for just a few of many examples see Anderson and Bushman, 2001; Greitemeyer and Mügge, 2014; Krahé and Möller, 2004). Considering the large amount of studies dealing with possible effects of violence in computer games, there are surprisingly few exceptions discussing virtual violence from another angle (cf. DeVane and Squire, 2008; Jansz, 2005; Kocurek, 2012; Schroeder, 2011; Sørensen, 2013). I also adopt a different perspective and look beyond the question of how violence in video games affects its players. My question is rather: what makes it *fun*? In conclusion, the article brings together a discussion of violence, virtuality, play, pleasure, emotional practices and space, thus contributing a new perspective for an ongoing sociopolitical discussion concerned with violence in video games.

2. Playful virtual violence

The term 'violence' can be understood in many different ways, such as symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001) or structural violence (Galtung, 1969). Here, I use it to refer solely to physical violence. By physical violence I mean any behavior that intentionally and materially damages other humans, animals, or things. Although the intention of such a behavior can neither be observed directly nor always determined with certainty, this definition still provides a rather neutral (and non-judgemental) basis for an ethnographic analysis (see also Collins, 2008).

Of course, in video games there is no actual material damage of living beings or things. Most currently available action games, however, contain very explicit representations of physical violence and allow players to do something with these representations in practices that can be defined as 'virtual'. In recent years, there has been much debate over the analytic potential of the term 'virtuality' (see the contributions to Grimshaw, 2014). For ethnographic studies of video games, a definition by Tom Boellstorff has proved highly influential. He states that 'virtuality' is a kind of 'potentiality', something that exists “whenever there is a perceived gap between experience and 'the actual”——in other words: “'virtual' connotes approaching the actual without arriving there” (Boellstorff, 2008: 19). This definition might seem problematic, since it appears to ignore the fact that any virtual process is building upon material (and thus actual) technology (see Kinsley, 2014). Yet from an ethnographic perspective the distinction between 'virtual' and 'actual' is still very useful, since it allows us to distinguish virtual practices from non-virtual practices without mapping them onto a dichotomy between 'virtual' and 'real' (for a critical discussion of this dichotomy from the perspective of Cultural Geography see Ash and Gallacher, 2011: 358–359). Computer gaming practices, for example, are just as real as any other practices, but they are not 'actual' in the sense of concrete physical entities. Virtual entities and practices are distinct from actual entities and practices while at the same time being in a permanent process of referring to them (what Boellstorff seems to imply when speaking of 'approaching the actual'). The philosopher Philip Brey (2014) elaborates on this distinction by differentiating between 'virtual objects' and 'digital objects'. For him, digital objects are computer-generated bits and bytes that have neither explicit mass nor a position in physical space. Through these 'digital objects', 'virtual objects' are created: “Virtual objects are digital objects that appear to us as physical objects and that we interact with in a manner similar to physical objects” (2014: 44).

This notion of similarity is decisive for the study of virtual practices. Computer-generated representation of bodies, spaces, and actions are (as Boellstorff states) not actual, but on the other hand can only be meaningful by referring to something actual through an audiovisual similarity. Following up on his original argument, Boellstorff speaks of “indexical relationships that constantly co-constitute both the virtual and actual” (2012: 40). From a practice theory perspective, this is not to say that virtual practices are simply simulations of actual practices. Rather, they can be understood as practices of using the similarities between computer-generated representations and actual entities in order to do something meaningful within a computer-generated environment. Every computer gaming process is based on this principle and it is also decisive for understanding violence in video games: Virtual violence is a practice of using computer-generated representations of actual physical violence in a meaningful way.

Finally, the violence in video games is not only virtual but also playful. As the concepts of 'play' and 'game' have been discussed extensively within game studies, I will neither discuss the whole spectrum of approaches available nor present a definition of these terms. Rather, I will focus on a notion of 'play' suggested by Gregory Bateson in a presentation in 1954, later published under the title 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy' (2006). Generally speaking, Bateson's theory of play is one of communication; it discusses how actors use communicative signals on various levels of abstraction. He is concerned with “the drama precipitated when organisms, having eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, discover that their signals are signals” (2006: 316). By 'organisms' he does not only mean humans, as his oft-cited observation in a San Francisco Zoo of two play-fighting monkeys demonstrates. He came to the conclusion that both monkeys had to somehow know that what they were engaging in was 'not combat'. They could only achieve this mutual understanding by exchanging metacommunicative signals. Based on this observation, Bateson develops a theory of play as a theory of metacommunication, which encompasses a paradox, since the metacommunicative signal “This is play” communicates the statement: “These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote” (2006: 317). From this perspective, play is a process of using specific meanings that are on the one hand distinguished from non-playful practices through metacommunicative signals but on the other hand can only be meaningful and effective by referring to these very non-playful practices. The media theorist Britta Neitzel sums this paradox up in one sentence: “A playful action denotes, and at the same time it does not denote, the 'real' action to which it refers” (2008: 281).

This theoretical perspective is decisive for understanding the pleasures of gaming, since they are always enacted through playful practices. The paradox emerging through the playfulness of virtual violence goes hand in hand with its virtuality. The latter is an ideal basis for playful activity using representations of violence since the metacommunicative frame “This is a game” is constantly signaled by the fact that every action is digitally mediated and not actual. At the same time, the digital mediation allows the references to actual violence to be representationally more explicit than, for example, in a game of chess. Playful virtual violence is a practice of using some of the meanings and implications of actual physical violence through these very explicit computer-mediated representations while framing this practice as play. Ultimately, this practice serves one purpose: to do pleasure. In the following section I outline my approach to analyze playful virtual violence as pleasure, using the concept of emotional practices.

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