Ballistic Reaction and Thwarted Expectation: Video Game Violence and Aggressive Response

Jeffrey Goldstein notes that the discourse on violent video games has been mired in "ambiguous definitions, poorly designed research, and the continued confusion of correlation with causality." (Goldstein, 341). At the heart of his piece, is a project to understand modes of meaning production for players who engage with, and interpret, violence in video games. It is all about context – for example, whether the violence in a game is juxtaposed with humour, whether the player is involved in meting out simulated violence, or perhaps if a game is constructing its core gameplay loop around a war metaphor, such is the case in chess or American football. Correlational studies (field studies), experiments, and meta-analyses have been the research strategies for studying the effects of violent video games, however, each approach has weaknesses and none of the research can determine whether violence in a video game will cause aggressive behaviour (Goldstein, 343).

Correlational studies have been stymied by issues of causality. In cases where positive correlation is found between violence in games and aggressive real-life behaviour, it has been impossible to explain away potential third variables. Poor grades in school, mental hyperactivity, and low self-esteem could be a cause for aggressive behaviour when engaged with violent video games, or alternatively, an effect (Goldstein, 344). Goldstein purports that experiment as a research method will fall severely short of elucidating on effects of video game play because the working conditions of an experiment preclude the very possibility for "play" given its inherent qualities of freedom (Goldstein, 344). Play implies a particular suspension of reality that has no foreground when a player is knowingly participating in a study.

A more fruitful endeavor would be to define the relationship between mock violence and real violence. When is fantasy conflated with reality? Or, is it ever (that is to say, in non-schizophrenic individuals)? Goldstein cites Dill & Dill (1998) and criticizes the looseness in which they define the goals for success in real life as opposed to the goals for success in a game (Goldstein, 345). Killing in a video game is a representational act of violence and the "real" act of killing in a video game is to engage in a sequence of actions with controller or keyboard, which is not a violent act, per se. At a semiotic level, "violence" and "aggression" are terms which are being used interchangeably between media, and therein exists a meaningful fallacy for the effects model in game studies to date.

Real-life violence has psychological, physical, conscious, unconscious, social and individualist components that are distinct from simulated violence. It is far from a straightforward task to parse these components from an individual act of real-life or simulated violence. Perhaps, we shouldn't try. In the end, only a theoretical lens geared for "affect" will be able to craft a pseudo-consolidation of the components. Researchers will examine how the player "feels" and work backwards to define the components through these professed emotional states of the subject. It is a teleology that is relied on far too much in the soft sciences, and in turn is corroding the legitimacy of much research in those fields at present.

My purpose here is not a froward critique of affect theory as implemented - with what I consider to be a significant lack of rigour - in post-structuralist studies. The scope exceeds my insight, unfortunately. Instead, I offer that "expectation" be the dominant variable in the effects model for video game studies. Goldstein notes many studies where players are examined for

aggressive behaviour when playing violent video games that they are either not already familiar with or that they only play for a short period. The researchers are therefore hoping to uncover a ballistic reaction, at best, which is unlikely for most people in any circumstance.

I recall that at a family wedding, I had accidentally spilled red wine on my mother's dress. Her reaction was far beyond what I might have predicted. She froze momentarily and then broke out in tears, racing out of the room. I was shocked because there had been other "accidents" similar to this in the past and my mother's reaction was never so ballistic – irrational and sudden. Upon reflection, I understand now that my mother had had an expectation that she would look good at the wedding and that this superficial appearance was very important to her. I had severely disrupted that expectation with my careless clumsiness.

The personal anecdote illustrates that ballistic reactions will likely be based on thwarted expectations. An important question to ask, is whether there is an expectation of success or achievement when a player is engaged with a game they are unfamiliar with, or when they only play for a few minutes (let's say, under an hour)? I have played ice hockey for over thirty years, but would not expect my slapshot to be its most devastating – accurate, hard and straight – after being on the ice for ten to twenty minutes at the start of the season. Similarly, I have never been adept at basketball and have little to no expectation of success when playing, competitively or otherwise. In the first twenty minutes of shooting pucks or shooting baskets, I would be unlikely to get frustrated, and therefore aggressive – there is simply no expectation of success that is being challenged or thwarted by the game.

I am an elite player in Gears of War 2 (2008, Epic Games) and have been playing the game for almost a decade. "Wall-bouncing" and "pop-shotting" are elite skills that I am fully capable of performing. I take long breaks from the game (months to years), but when I return and begin honing my skills once more I also give myself some leeway performance-wise. For the first few weeks, I will not get frustrated or aggressive when playing Gears because I have no expectation of immediate success. I need time to re-familiarize myself with button sequences, map layouts, new opponents, improved old opponents and possible updates that enhanced game performance or added new content, among other factors. After a few weeks, my expectations are great and when I do not perform to the level that I expect, I will indeed become frustrated and aggressive. In fact, it is shameful to admit, but I have snapped three game discs in half and have owned five copies of Gears of War 2 even though I only play on a single console machine.

My experience as a "hardcore" gamer, as well as, my interaction with other gamers like myself in FPSs and other games that rely on representations of violence, has been that ballistic reactions are few and far between. Frustration and aggression while playing seem to be tied to expectation where expectation is based on experience with a game, time in a game session, recognition of the quality and ability of opponents, and problems with latency in network connections. I would suggest that whether the game has violent representations is more-or-less irrelevant. I have been as frustrated by losing a match in QuizUp, Family Feud or Scattergories on my mobile device as I have been by being bested in Gears of War and this is because my expectation of success is the same in all those games.

In 2009, I bought a puppy and Sobek the Finnish Lapphund became the most important personality in my life. He is a true best friend and is my first dog. One day in the park, about a year later, I met another dog owner and we got to talking about our creative lives. I mentioned that I had been involved in a fairly large art project as lead designer and producer. This was of

interest to the dog owner because he was planning on having a similar role in an indie clothing company. We exchanged contact information. Several months after this, I received an email from the dog owner asking some general questions about my art project. I sat on the reply. In 2012, I was sifting through old emails and stumbled upon his letter. I replied and apologized for the tardiness in responding to him and asked him how the business had worked out and how his dog was doing. He replied the next day and said that it would be unlikely for him to see me in the same park where we had met given what had happened the night before. I was confused and asked for clarification. He answered that there had been a murder in the park.

This news was fairly shocking for me given that the park was in my childhood neighbourhood and at the geographic centre of a large network of friends. I played little league baseball as a child in that park, smoke joints in high school there and it was the primary park for my dog to play at as a puppy. No more than fifteen minutes after the news in this email correspondence, I received a phone call from my oldest friend, Jordana. She asked whether I had heard about what happened to James. From her tone and pregnant pause, I immediately understood that one of my best friends had been the murder victim. James was one of my closest friends and we spent several summers gaming together. He would bring over his Playstation 3 and we logged in hundreds of hours on COD: Black Ops. Every Canada Day (July 1st), there was a BBQ party on Centre Island in Toronto and James was a key organizer. When I learned who had murdered James, it came as a complete shock – it was one of his best friends. The previous Canada Day celebration, the three of us had been tossing the football back and forth. It seemed surreal when I was remembering it.

The murderer pleaded guilty in court and is currently in prison. Through my network of friends, I already knew that the murderer had been a drug dealer and I knew that he had an extreme history of violence. I remember that his nickname in high school was "Fireman" because he had taken the pin from a fire extinguisher and stabbed another kid in the throat with it. I had always urged James to spend more time with me and less time with the murderer but it was a delicate topic to broach, for obvious reasons. The murderer was also known for extreme "game rage". There were stories that this man had destroyed several television sets when throwing game controllers into the screen because of dissatisfaction with the gaming experience. The murderer was an elite player in COD games online and I had played with him online before, but never in person. I had seen the rage quitting firsthand, but could not confirm acts of physical violence.

Some naïve researchers working with the effects model would likely attribute this man's murderous rage to the violent video game shooters that were so important to his free time. I would wholly disagree. The murderer had expectation of success in the FPS games that he played. Failing those expectations did not result in him murdering James. James was not murdered because this man had been bested in an online game. Instead, there had been some confusion about stolen money and it seemed James was the only possible suspect in the eyes of the murderer. The murderer had expectation of success in his drug-running business and having had money and supply taken thwarted those expectations. This is why James was murdered. The video games are unrelated. The connection is in thwarted expectations of success and achievement.

The important question for studying the link in violent video games and aggression is whether the player had an expectation of success and achievement. Is there any aggression demonstrated when there is no expectation of success? How does expectation get qualified and quantified? For example, what is the difference between expecting success with an unfamiliar game or familiar game? In, a short session or a long session? Against, the computer or real

opponents? We have expectations for success in life and this is strongly tied to a basic survival instinct. Our expectations transcend all of our experiences. My expectation of success in basketball is the same as in Rocket League or D&D – I have virtually none. The chance that I will show aggression when failing in these activities is quite low. The inverse is true with ice hockey or Gears of War. If I can't be successful in the things I know and practice, then how can I survive in life? The failure in these things that I know and practice, may elicit frustration and aggression as a means of personal motivation, whether these affective responses are optimally productive or not.

There is another indelible memory in my mind's eye regarding expectation. When I was in middle school, my family had moved to England and I was put in a private school for the children of my father's work colleagues. There were kids from all over the world at that school. One day in gym class, we were out on the pitch doing track and field activities. The boys were running a hundred meter dash while the girls were on the side of the track doing long jump and triple jump. I had those raging hormones only a thirteen-year old can shamelessly embrace. While I was running my heat, I noticed the girls on the side watching us – watching me. I waved to them and smiled while running full-tilt down the track. At the end of the race, the gym teacher was pretty ticked-off and let me know it. He considered my showboating to mean that I didn't take the class seriously. Upon reflection, I believe that as a fast runner, my expectation had been to win my heat, but that the girls as spectators was shifting that expectation. To fail my expectation with no audience was remarkably different than with an audience. I think this makes sense.

The anecdote also begs the question as to whether any of the effects model research conducted through experiments has any legitimate value, as the researcher was an audience for the player in these studies. As a result, the players may have shifted their expectations in one of two directions based on the general dispositions of their unique personalities. The player may take the audience as a performance cue, such that the expectation for success has become more important – failing the expectation may lead to aggression. Alternatively, the player may render the audience to an excuse for lowering expectations (like I did while running on the track) and therefore one might expect less aggression to be shown when expectations of success are not met. Even double-blind conditions in an experiment do not preclude a gamer from the realization of an implied audience. It isn't whether violent representations in video games cause aggressive behaviour, but whether expectation of success is remarkably different in gaming compared with other aspects of life. Which conditions alter expectation? Do these conditions increase or decrease aggressive response? Violence in video games is simply a condition for games that may increase or decrease aggressive response in players depending on how they react to their expectations of success being altered and alterable.

Playing video games is typically a more private experience physically, but with the advent of online multiplayer modes for most new computer and console games, there is a social experience – therefore, an audience. Thus, the relevant question might be, "does online multiplayer gaming cause aggression in players?" Is this more significant than whether a game represents violence or not? The most aggressive reactions that I have been privy to in my gaming experience relate to incidents where there was a perception that an opponent cheated – that the audience is scripting the player's performance as it were and thwarting the expectations of success for the player. In these cases, the reactions have a ballistic quality. That is to say, perhaps cheating and dark play, as opposed to representational violence, is the most significant factor for determining aggressive behaviour in players of video games.

Sources Cited

Goldstein, J. (2005). Violent video games. In J. Raessens & J. Goldstein (Eds.), Handbook of computer game studies. MIT Press.