Criminological and Sociological Aspects of Video Games

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Abstract

The article deals with specific connection of crime and artificial intelligence in context of video games. As a new and developing mean of both entertainment and communication, this mass media tends to mimic older representations of crime, yet offering to consumers unique virtual experiences in this prohibited field. Furthermore, paper tries to show possible connections between narratives about violating the law presented in video games and virtual identities which players are taking in such settings detached from primary social surroundings. By description of different game genders and types of crime present in them, paper tries to go beyond moralistic stigmatization and point out main relevant themes for sociological and criminological inquiry in this field. Comparison between these different prohibited activities and their (re)presentations show deeper cultural causality and raise the question why some kinds of crime are considered to be taboo, while others can be seen as "a mere play"?

1. Fiction or Reality?

It is well known that crime can sometimes be *ludic* in nature – committed not because of material gain or fulfillment of realistic interests, but for sake of joy of playing. What could motivate people to steal unnecessary objects, possibly without any value, other than feeling of risk, uncertainty, showing courage and determination which most people lack, or power achieved over others using skillful and tactical actions? Same is true for engaging intro fights, dangerous and risky behavior in public traffic, experimenting whit psychoactive substances and many other prohibited activities.

On the other hand, many sports and other legal games have elements which would be considered as braking of the law in different context(s). Range of such phenomena is broad, from children games which include mock-stealing of certain items to boxing and other violent sports, as well as harmful physical attacks in general, stealing and insulting others in theatrical plays etc. Yet, all these examples fall into well explored fields of sociology, while some may be only relevant as interesting contrast of reality in theoretical debates. Still, there is one more, relatively new type of "playing" which is especially interesting from the perspective of artificial intelligence – video games.

The topic of video-games can be studied sociologically in two different ways. The first perspective is based on drawing similarities between games and much older genders of communication between people: songs, stories, literature, theatrical plays, movies etc. In that sense, a video game is a narrative which can be analyzed as any other text, by exploring its content and its connections to social structures and processes. This can be achieved with the application of vast literature about discourse analyses (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 2008, 2009; Wodak, 1996).

Second perspective takes into consideration very specific aspect of video games – their ability to involve living humans into specific actions, which may or may not be part of their everyday experience. Unlike more detached (Elias, 1956) forms of texts, video games seek active participation from humans. That's why they can be also studied from more individual and behaviorist perspective offered by theories of rational choice and game theories in general (Elster, 1989). In both cases, discursive and practical, involvement in such virtual activities certainly has deep connections with real, social world. By being personally engaged in certain activities and by adopting particular identities of played characters, a person's experience and many other mental aspects can change in different ways. In that sense, video games are more profoundly affecting individuals than older mediums of learning (Gee, 2005). Still, what is so specific about video games in both senses, and why they can be important for understanding criminal behavior in general?

2. Crime in Two Dimensions

Although we can recognize some characteristics of modern video games in earlier, pre-digital era, such as different board, card and other social games, development of digital technologies brought enormous changes in this type of entertainment. In the beginning, simple processors and graphical hardware could only mimic already known games, such as chess, ping pong or Nine Man's Morris, which doesn't offer players any chance to introspect their moral actions, or break any norms. Such games had a second described aspect, but lacked the first one – they weren't narratives or texts. Also, they tended to fall into earlier described category of games played together with real people in genuine social context (or mimicked it).

As decades were passing, and closing to the 21st century, video games started to become more complex in all of its aspects. This includes rules of the games, as well as graphics and sound. It all lead to the situation in which video-games started to mimic "real life" in many fields. Some of those fields of social life aren't relevant for this paper, such as sports and other simulations, puzzle and purely logical games, yet other are. Even some early games with crude graphics concerned public with it deviant content, such as *Death Race* from 1976, which was violent in nature, and *Custer's Revenge* from 1982, which was problematic from two points: sexual violence and depiction of Native Americans. Complex video games offered to human players a unique experience by interacting with AI (artificial intelligence) NPCs ("non-player characters"), and such integrations can be aggressive and destructive in their nature. Although not even all of these actions aren't necessarily interesting from and perspective of sociology of deviations or crime (such as games that include aggression towards fantastic creatures) sometimes such games represent different array of criminal behaviors. Also, deviant graphical scenery accompanied by blood, bizarre or grotesque details or occult practices, which is characteristic of some video games, will not be taken here into account. Although it can be relevant from the perspective of this paper, only examples which include player's action will be considered here.

It should be made clear from start that playing video games doesn't include punishable criminal activity[1], because virtual characters don't have a status of legal subjects. On the other hand, they are a medium which transmit certain crime related

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[1] Unless in case of unauthorized use of copyrights, games that are actually form of illegal gambling, or different offences which are aimed against real people, such as blackmailing, bulling, hate speech etc.

contents, from practical and factual knowledge (types of firearms and their specifications, tactics and techniques for committing crime) to certain moral values about illegal activities. In this sense, new digital mediums don't differ from older channels of mass communication which have always took keen interest in crime (Ignjatović, 2008:11-12). The main purpose of this article is to give brief resume of gaming genres which are relevant for this topic, together with particular examples. First such described phenomenon will be the broadest one, and probably the most embedded in our culture – physical violence.

3. Fighting Games

Probably the first fighting game that took attention of the public was *Mortal Kombat* in 1992. For the first time, realistic, "movie-like", depictions of humans engaging in very brutal violence and depiction of blood was employed in any video game. Although, from a cultural perspective, the game draws its themes from martial art movies and other media depictions which became very popular in the 1970s and 1980s, it stressed out very essence of what video games meant. Instead of only watching the violent act of fighting[2], game had pushed players to actively participate in literal and repeated bloodshed. On the other hand, while movies could narratively contextualize violence in moral categories, such as "struggle between good and evil", this game has offered players a chance to freely choose their side. Even more so, it didn't allow any other type of behavior for players, because winning of successive series of fights was the only available scenario. In that sense violence was portrayed as a mean by itself. It is also highly esteticized, and fighters are presented as a charismatic character which are possessing superhuman qualities. This gender of video games, and particularly *Mortal Kombat*, had a profound influence on forming *The Entertainment Software Rating Board* (ESRB) in 1994, and although this agency can't enforce its decisions by force of law, game distributors in the USA follow their guidance[3].

Similar type of games, but presented in a different context, are the so called "beat 'em up" gender. They represent situations in which the player is encountering masses of NPCs which are aggressive by default, so violent response is the only valid action, as well as in fighting games. Again, this sub-gender also has roots in cinema and closely resembles martial arts movies in which one particularly competent fighter defeats all the odds, as well as all the opponents. Here also, violence plays a pivotal role, because it is a main motivator of the whole story. Paradoxically, aggressive acts become a form of communication between player and NPS, serving as a main drama plot. Yet, this gender of video games can be interpreted in different manners, because the player doesn't step into the world of voluntary duels, but in a hostile environment where almost any other living creature is depicted both as a threat and as a target. Interpersonal relations are reduced only to antagonisms.

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[2] Particularly, in a martial arts tournament which is implicitly illegal, because matches are fought to the death.

[3] Situation is different in Canada, where ESRB ratings are enforecd by provincial law in some proveinces.

4. Shooting Games

Although essentially similarly to the previous category, games containing violence committed using firearms have many peculiarities. First of all, they are more detached from the everyday reality of an ordinary person. While bare hand fighting can be performed at any time, and is very common among children (Collins, 2001), because harm done by such assaults is usually expected to be minimal, shooting at someone is a very different thing. It is a rare event because of two reasons: lack of access to firearms and serious consequences it can bring. This fact probably is a part of the allure shooting games has on players – this is something that they never experienced in their life, and probably they won't try it ever. Still, because of the developing nature of gaming software, shooting simulations became so realistic that they can be considered as some sort of training material for firearm use. Such practices are even employed by professional armies and police, yet they can't be considered as reliable method. First of all, considerable weight and recoil of gun is neglected, and even more importantly, games lack psychical and mental aspects of a real shooting: fatigue, loss of breath, anxiety, fear, adrenaline rush and many other processes which occupy the body and mind of people employed in combat.

What shooting games certainly don't lack is an encyclopedic *corpus* of facts about different types of firearms and their characteristics. Presented in an engaging way, such knowledge can be easily acquired by the player. Other important aspect are elements of firearm combat tactics and other skills, such as moving true space, taking cover, making ambushes and so on. Although it is clear that it is very unlikely that someone will become professional hitman or an armed robber by being game influenced, yet they show lot of resemblance with one peculiar type of crime, especially feared in the USA – mass shootings (and particularly school shootings).

A strong link between such crimes and the playing of video games was sometimes even stressed by perpetrators, their defense and relatives in order to minimize their guilt and accuse game producers. Such was the case of infamous school shooting in Columbine, in 1999, in which attackers were partially influenced by the *Doom* (Ferguson, 2009), considering other students as monsters from that game. The scenario looks similar, because shooting at unarmed people put attackers in the same role of omnipotent characters from the game. Still, the long lasting and primal cause of this crime was school bulling, and the obsession with shooting games seems to be a consequence of this type of social isolation, and not the cause of the massacre.

5. Role-playing Games

This particular genre of video games is much broader and diverse than the previous two ones. Their plots are ranging from fantasy, fairy or epic narratives, to SF fantasies and even contemporary, realistic settings. On the one hand, such games can be totally deprived of any criminal activity, or can encompass all of the previous phenomena and even more. Such games are rich in narrative, and are offering players the liberty to choose between many actions. Concerning all of this, this gender is basically considered as some sort of simulation of real life, where contents of the game interact with values and norms of the player in a creative way, developing his fictional character.

Drawing from more recently popular quasi-medieval epic fantasy literary and cinematic genders which saw its proliferation beginning with the early 2000s, many

titles are combining morally virtuous decisions with ones that are questionable. The example here will be the *Elder Scrolls* series[4], probably the most popular of the whole sub-gender. The latest title from this series, *Skyrim* (2011), allows players to choose from a plethora of activities. Some of them are non-problematic, such are collecting raw materials, crafting and selling items, eliminating dangerous animals etc. Others are partially problematic from a criminological perspective, because they represent actions the legality of which is contested from different historical and cultural perspectives – such as killing people in self-defense, attacking brigands and participating in a civil war. The third case is the most interesting, because it allows player to engage in criminal activities to a various degree: from casual theft and pickpocketing to professional burglaries or even paid assassinations. Some of those activities are represented as "skills", which can be further developed by practicing them (pickpocketing, lockpicking, sneaking, killing unaware targets etc.).

Depiction of violence in role-playing games is also different than in the previous two genders. While some NPCs are again aggressive by default, so fighting them can be considered as self-defense, others are peaceful and acting in a socially acceptable manner. This difference can be interpreted both optimistically and in more misanthropic way, because players can decide to act in benign patterns, or to take part in predatory activities against virtual characters which pose no threat. Besides the thrill of doing something unusual and forbidden – stealing or murdering –, such actions can bring benefits to the player's character as well. Not only that he will gain material recourses in the game, but he will also become more proficient in sneaking, stealing, or the use of certain weapons. Still, such actions won't go unchecked by the other NPCs which act as police in virtual world, so one may be punished for certain crimes committed in the game. It is also worth mentioning that on all of the *Elder Scrolls* series, as well as in many other open world role-playing games, players can choose to follow different in-game scenarios and storylines which aren't necessary to complete the game, but can prolong his playing time and experience. Some of them, in this particular case, can represent participating in organized crime associations, such as thieves and assassins "guilds". Again, such narratives usually mimic older forms of non-digital entertainment, such as romanticized stories about life of criminals and social bandits (Bulatović, Pavićević: 2017). This area will be covered in the next part of the paper.

6. Simulations of Professional Crime

This example is specific, because it doesn't represent any particular gender of games. Sometimes they can be described as cross-gender, combining shooting, driving, role-playing, fighting aspects. Still, some features that bound all these titles in the same category is their common theme – simulation of participating in professional crime. Some of these games are adaptations of movies, such as *The Warriors*, *Dirty Harry*, *Reservoir Dogs* and *The Godfather*, even thou basically the whole group is inspired and

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[4] Imagined and fantastic world in which this series take place is inspired by the Roman Empire and the medieval Europe and Japan. This somewhat reduces contemporary criminological relevance, because attacking someone with and bow and arrows is very rare in XXI century, and doing crime with help of magic is even more redundant. Yet, it is very interesting to analyse fantastic and quasi-historical narrative from pro-chronistic perspective, particularly how modern conceptions about crime affect even our imagination of unexciting, fairy tale-like worlds.

has lot in common with crime movies. Because the topic of this gender and this paper is very broad and diversified, these games can include many particular activities: stealing, murdering, organizing prostitution, drug dealing, collecting protection money etc.

An example of a specialized game series which was very controversial from the date it started is *Hitman*. This game series looks like a James Bond movie at the first glance, although the main protagonist, agent 47, lacks social charisma of 007 and has different goal than saving the world – he is as professional assassin. Players can usually choose one among few methods of killing the target, from straight gunfight to more clandestine and cunning methods. Later, such as poisoning, garroting, sniper targeting or causing a heart attack in sauna are better rewarded by in-game mechanics. This also means that killing of non-targeted NPCs is considered as a bad achievement. Every assassination must be strategically planned by taking into account location, measures of security, preferable method, and escape route, which can include evading metal detectors, hiding dead bodies, accessing restricted areas and masking. Although the topic of this franchise is one of the most serious crimes, fate and life of professional assassin is portrayed romantically and with sympathy.

An example of series which are less specialized and morally more ambiguous than *Hitman* is famous *GTA: Grand Theft Auto*. Although the very name of the series suggests that this game series is all about stealing cars and violating the traffic code, it includes a wide variety of criminal activities in open worlds which are depicting great cities in the USA (New York, Miami and Los Angeles). Every title in this commercially extremely successful series caused lot of controversies, because it simulates real life crime in contemporary great cities, and was generally considered to be a bad model for players worldwide. A prominent feature of this series is that it lacks heroic depiction of criminal activities which was present in many games mentioned before. Players assume the role of a petty criminal which doesn't have any other motives than to climb up criminal hierarchy by completing missions given by local "bosses", as their client. The public was especially concerned by the appearance of highly controversial themes, such as driving under the influence of alcohol, drug dealing, killing of police officers and torturing captured targets.

7. Crimes of the State

After discussing some of the more apparent examples of crime portrayal in video games, we will consider one less likely candidate for analyses. While before mentioned crimes were the ones committed by an individual person, now the focus of this paper will change to crimes which include misuse of political power and position in the state apparatus. This sounds marginal at the first glance, yet it must be taken into account in order to have an all-encompassing description of the topic. So, why portrayal of individual murders and theft are considered to be so problematic, while declaration of war, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and different severe breaking of international law and human rights is neglected? The reason is clear – while public imagination is prone to be occupied by fantasies of problematic youth committing violence under the influence of the video game, no one will seriously ever claim that teenagers can perform any of these actions which demand control over one political subject.

Also, genders of video games in which such actions are possible usually don't portray gore, blood or physical violence at the level of the previous titles. These are mostly strategy games, which simulate governing over one state, or an army, and are

more elaborated versions of traditional board games such as chess or *Risk*. Development of software made them so complex that certain title can be considered as a learning material in fields of geography and history. Example that will be presented here is composed from series of grand historical strategy games produced by *Paradox Entertainment*, which cover three different eras: medieval (*Crusader Kings I* and *II*), early modern (*Europa Universalis I* to *IV*), XIXth century, WWI and inter-war period (*Victoria I* and *II*) and WWII (*Hearts of Iron I* to *IV*). Two aspects of crime representations can be noted in these games. First, there are actions which are now considered to be illegal, but were accepted in the referred era, such as religious conversions, slavery or planed cultural assimilation. Second, actions that were generally prohibited, sanctioned or considered as a breaking of laws or customs throughout the history are also available for player to recreate. For example, in *Crusader Kings*, one may assassinate his rivals, even family members, mutilate or sacrifice prisoners or expel Jewish population from his realm; *Europa Universalis* allows players to raze whole cities, commit genocide on native populations or engage in espionage or piracy, while *Victoria* and *Hearts of Iron* can be played from the perspective of fascist states.

8. Sexual Violence in Video Games

This topic is left for the very end, because it is peculiar in many ways. First of all, while all other types of violence and other illegal activities saw its proliferation in the last 30 years or so, sexually themed games remain a taboo, at least in Westerner, or more specifically, non-Japanese culture. Because minors are considered to form great part of games market, large companies are censoring even nudity in order to make their products available worldwide and evade being labeled as pornography. Even thou games depicting sexual intercourse remain on margins of publicity – which is even more true for games covering rape themes – occasionally, some cases stir public attention. Such was the fate of the Japanese game *RapeLay* (2006), which although never meant to be distributed outside Japan sparked controversies in UK, US, Australia and Argentina, subsequently making it impossible to be obtained and, in the end, withdrawing the title even in the country of its origin.

The main problem here, of course, isn't the question why games which include explicit sexual violence should be censored. The problem is why other types of violence are considered to be appropriate (for at least adult population)? There are probably at least two answers. First, violence is morally ambiguous, and is usually still divided in categories of legitimate and illegitimate behavior. Historically, it tended to be more accepted in the past (Elijas, 2001), yet we still keep the memories of these times in heroic narratives which are transmitting or mimicking epic stories about violent individuals. In the end, aggression can be instrumental, and sometimes used to ward of attacks and sustain very preservation of one's life, or even the survival of the entire community. On the other hand, sexual violence is always motivated by asocial drives, so it lacks even the thinnest base to be considered legitimate. Also, it can be associated with pornography which leads to outright censorship.

9. Conclusion

Video games tend to fall into category of "folk devils" (Cohen, 1972) which cause moral panic. As Norbert Elias rightly stressed out, important aspect of civilization is a

slow movement from tactile and gustative impressions to visual and auditive (Elijas, 2001). It means that civilized man will not "enjoy" in violence with his hands, but with his eyes and ears. By only watching and listening about violent and other criminalized acts, civilized man knows that he will not cause any harm, nor even more importantly, suffer any.

This brings us to a second aspect, that is that video games (single player at least) lack genuine social aspects. They are played in an artificial, digital environment, and consequences of decisions taken in such a context are detached from "real" social world. Yes, one may be thrilled by fantasies about stealing or committing burglary in a game, or estheticizing or glorifying violence, but this will hardly make a thief or are murdered out of him. If a crucial element, a micro situation for committing such acts lacks, anything like it won't happened. Even thou there is a lot of physiological research (Barlett *et al.*, 2008; Anderson *et al.*, 1997) which shows that participating in violent games can cause aggressive behavior, this is only true under laboratory conditions. Real life, where one is confronted with danger of both corporal suffering and enduring shame, is a different thing. Skills, emotional management, attitudes and (quasi)moral "values" must be learnt from real people in a real social context of crime.

Finally, while it is impossible to draw a strong conclusion about video games being the cause of criminal behavior, they offer an intriguing filed for research on its own, at least in two already mentioned topics. First, how crime is depicted in the contemporary culture? Is it glorified and romanticized, or shunned? And second, maybe even more important, how people morally behave in a "social vacuum", while interacting with virtual characters? Are they choosing to break the everyday routine and laws which govern it for the sake of fun, or are they projecting their morality even into temporal virtual identity during the game? This question can have many furthers repercussions, concerning that we can expect AI to be even more involved in real social lives of humans in the near future.

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