On Playing Violent Computer Games
-An Ethical Investigation

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Abstract
This essay presents an analysis of McCormick’s moral defense of playing violent computer games. He claims that utilitarian and Kantian frameworks cannot provide general moral condemnation for engaging in simulated violence, but that Aristotelian virtue ethics can, due to the erosion of the player’s moral character that occurs when performing simulated violent acts. I argue that McCormick is wrong, and that no game can be morally condemned in general for just featuring violence, not even on Aristotelian grounds, and that each game needs to be assessed individually with each particular player in mind.
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1. Introduction

“My name is not important. What is important is what I’m going to do. I just fucking hate this world. And the human worms feasting on its carcass. My whole life is just cold, bitter hatred. And I always wanted to die violently. This is the time of vengeance and no life is worth saving. And I will put in the grave as many as I can. It’s time for me to kill. And it’s time for me to die. My genocide crusade begins here.” –Hatred (Destructive Creations, 2015)

Back in 2007 a game called Manhunt 2 (Rockstar, 2007) was released. It was the first game ever to receive the AO rating (Adults Only) on violence and language alone, without featuring any sexual content. It is a stealth-based horror game about the character Daniel Lamb, an amnesic mental escapee. On his journey to reclaim his identity, and find out who he is, he tortures and murders people in a brutally graphical manner. There is no alternative way of acting in the game, and so the player has no choice but to follow and go through with the gruesome storyline. Recently, a game called Hatred (Destructive Creations, 2015) was released, and is the second game in history to have received that same rating (Zolfagarifard & Robinson, 2015). Hatred is a dark game revolving around a suicidal man full of hatred for the world and the people inhabiting it. He knows that he will die, and he is determined to take as many people with him as he can. Setting out on the streets with an arsenal of machine guns and explosives, the protagonist goes on a genocidal killing spree, murdering innocent people with an extreme excess of force.

Computer games have steadily increased in popularity the last two decades. Playing digital games now rival movies and TV-shows as home entertainment, and the trend does not appear to be declining. It has just as long been commonly considered a waste of time playing computer games. Digital games in general have often been attributed of having an anti-social effect on its players, and violent games being particularly bad due to a pre-conceived notion of these leading to violent behavior. School shootings in the USA are often, at least partially, blamed on violent computer games, allegedly having influenced the perpetrator into committing the crimes. Empirical studies differ greatly, and although many of them point toward some strong link between playing violent computer games and increased aggression (e.g. Anderson & Bushman, 2001), the methods and findings of these studies are highly controversial (Ferguson, 2007).
The moral question on playing violent computer games is raised in an interesting way by McCormick (2001). He attempts to investigate whether or not there are grounds for morally condemning the playing of violent computer games in general, and arrives at the conclusion that utilitarianism and Kantianism provide no such grounds, and that they would deem playing violent computer games morally permissible. However, McCormick claims that the playing of violent computer games can be morally condemned in general on the basis of Aristotelian virtue ethics, because of the bad effects simulated violence has on the player’s moral character. In this paper, I will argue that even Aristotelian virtue ethics cannot provide a general, moral condemnation of playing violent computer games. I also briefly suggest that if one is looking for a general condemnation of such games, rule-utilitarianism may be able to offer grounds for that.

McCormick approaches the moral question of violent computer games by subjecting it to the three major ethical perspectives – utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, and virtue ethics. In the first following sections I will give a short description of each defense, and the respective major arguments, complemented with those of other philosophers on the subject, as well as my own comments. Consequently, I will present my own attempt at reaching an answer to the question on whether the playing of violent computer games generally can be morally condemned or not. I will end this paper with a section of concluding remarks, in which I briefly discuss how rule-utilitarianism possibly can provide grounds for a general, moral condemnation of playing violent computer games.

2. Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory, concerned solely with the consequences of an action. Arguably, there is a multitude of modifications and variations of this theory, but in its simplest form, the right action in any given situation is the one with the best consequences, all other actions being wrong. Moreover, the consequences are the best when factors such as well-being, preferences, utility, etc, are maximized. Utilitarians also differentiate between actions that are right because of their actual consequences, and those that are right because of their expected consequences.

McCormick uses a variety of utilitarianism that states that “an act is good insofar as it promotes benefit to people overall and it is bad to the extent that it causes harm to people overall” (2001, p. 279). He says that as long as the beneficial consequences of an act outweigh the harmful consequences of the act, the act is good. McCormick utilizes this form
of utilitarianism to allow for moral permission, so that even if an act does not yield the best consequences possible, it is not necessarily wrong. Thereby, an act that is not wrong, but also not the best, can be considered morally permissible. This form is much like Slote’s idea of *satisficing utilitarianism* (1984), which holds that an act can be right, as in good enough, even if another act actually produces better consequences.

Consequently, to condemn violent computer games as morally objectionable on utilitarian grounds, being a consequentialist theory, McCormick claims that there needs to be a causal connection between the person playing violent computer games and performing actual violent acts. McCormick’s utilitarian defense of violent computer games is twofold, saying that (i) there are insufficient studies showing that playing violent computer games causally increases risk, and (ii) even if this causal relation did exist the utilitarian would have to also morally condemn other risk increasing activities that we commonly engage in. I will cover, and comment on, both arguments below.

### 2.1 Causal connection to actual violence

There are empirical studies on teenagers and young adults that show increased aggression and desensitization as a direct cause of playing violent computer games (e.g. Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson, 2004). However, as Ferguson (2007) points out, many of these studies suffer from several problems. Their methodology mainly involves the inconsistent use of the modified Taylor Competitive Reaction Time Test, a behavioral test of aggression, which has been criticized for being deficient and invalid (Ferguson & Rueda, 2009). Additionally, this method of testing for aggression has been inconsistently applied to studies of computer games, yielding inconclusive results, and “has not provided compelling support to indicate either a correlational or causal relationship between violent game play and actual aggressive behavior” (Ferguson, 2007, p. 479).

Another concern raised by Ferguson is the high estimate of prevalent publication bias. Articles with positive, statistically significant results have a higher tendency for being selected for publication than negative ones, which Ferguson shows to be the case with studies on aggression with computer games (2007). Published empirical data with tests relying on the modified TCRRT-model (e.g. Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson, 2004), along with its conclusions, need to be read with this in mind. Also, apart from the general publication bias in the academic community, I believe that, on the particular subject matter of violent computer games, academics experience an additional pressure from society to publish articles which support, and justify, the moral panic on violent computer games prevalent today. The
school shootings in America play a big role in the feeding and maintaining of this panic, and it is my belief that society at large prefer a scapegoat to take the blame for the tragic incidents. Every new article published supporting the causality between playing violent computer games and committing actual violent acts, further marks these games as the culprit. Perhaps, and now I speculate, blaming violent computer games for being the cause for teenagers and young adults committing these acts, alleviates some guilt with the parents and schools involved. They are responsible for the education and upbringing of these young people, but by blaming violent computer games they avoid having to take responsibility for their behavior. Whatever the reason, I think society wants a scapegoat for the shootings, and this encourages publication bias with studies on the effects of playing violent computer games. As stated, these are my personal speculations, and the truth is most likely far more complex.

Studies such as those dealt with by Anderson & Bushman (2001) concludes that short-term elevated levels of aggression indeed can be observed with participants of several observations, but not only is much of their data based on a highly criticized methodology, as Ferguson & Rueda (2009) points out, the relevance of the studies in which some data was collected is unclear. At the time of Anderson & Bushman’s publication, studies on the effects of playing computer games were scarce and inconsistently carried out. However, there was an abundance of data collected through the years from studies on the effects of watching violent videos, and Anderson & Bushman claim that “[m]any of the underlying psychological processes identified in the TV-movie literature also apply to video games” (2001, p. 354). As these two mediums of entertainment were established to be sufficiently similar, data was used from studies on watching violent videos to draw conclusions on playing violent computer games. Their justification for treating the effects of playing violent computer games the same as for watching violent videos by claiming they share the same psychological processes is never explained, and no sources on their argument are presented. Supposedly, they rely on the reader’s understanding of both media being about watching graphical content on a monitor to sufficiently equate the two. Although they do share several characteristics, such as the use of a monitor, I consider the interactional element in computer games to be a distinct enough feature to, at least to some extent, lessen the relevance of the data applied by Anderson & Bushman (2001) onto the subject of computer games.

Another question, posed by Adachi & Willoughby (2010), is whether the raised level of aggression detected with participants of studies on violent computer games is solely connected to in-game violence. They claim that there are other elements in play apart from
the violence, namely competitiveness, difficulty and pace of action. These four factors can all cause elevated levels of aggression, but no studies on the subject of aggression with computer games have taken this notion into consideration. This, possibly inadvertent, disregard for factors other than violence, Adachi & Willoughby claim, makes it “unclear whether it is the violence in violent video games that has produced elevated levels of aggression compared to non-violent video games, or whether it is these other game characteristics that may have been responsible” (2010, p. 58). If aggression is the culprit, and violence therefore should be morally condemned for giving rise to aggression, then what of competitiveness, difficulty and pace of action? Given that these elements likewise increase aggression, hypothetically increasing the probability for violent behavior, I claim that we ought to consider morally condemning computer games for being highly competitive, or difficult, or being very fast-paced. This idea does not make any of the studies less relevant, as heightened levels of aggression regardless may, hypothetically, lead to aggressive behavior. Nonetheless, it does question the strength of the conclusions reached in studies on the violence-aggression connection.

On the topic of aggression, there is an important note to bear in mind. Many of the studies on the effects of playing violent computer games (e.g. Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson, 2004) concludes that there is some effect, short- or longterm, of elevated levels of aggression. As we have learned, the results are often inconclusive, and often rest on uncertain methodologies. Nonetheless, denying any connection, causal or correlational, between playing violent computer games and elevated levels of aggression seems unreasonable. But the question is not whether or not there is a causal connection between playing violent computer games and elevated levels of aggression. The question is whether or not playing violent computer games causes the player to perform actual violent acts. This connection is a far longer leap, yet to be consistently established. Another important thing to note is that players of violent computer games may not become violent at all, but that violent computer games attract already violent people. This is a factor that is difficult to consider in studies, and which further complicates the reading of the results and conclusions of them.

This marks the end of McCormick’s first utilitarian argument, that there is no sufficiently established causal relation between playing violent computer games and performing actual violent acts. In short, many studies on the subject are inconsistently carried out, and use empirical data from other areas of study to draw conclusions on that of computer games. Also, the studies focus only on the levels of aggression with the participants to prove causality between simulated and actual violence, and do not consider any other factors that
may be influential with aggression, such as competitiveness or difficulty. Next, McCormick’s second utilitarian argument is presented:

2.2 Accepting risk of harm
McCormick’s second utilitarian argument says that even if the risk of harm is increased with the playing of violent computer games, it is still unclear as to what degree, or even if it matters, as “showing that risk is increased by an activity is a far cry from showing that the activity is morally objectionable. Our lives are filled with risk increasing acts that we regularly accept because of the greater benefits to be derived from them” (McCormick, 2001, p. 280). He argues that if risk was enough to deny certain activities, then the utilitarian would be forced to deny not only playing violent computer games, but also watching violent movies, or driving a car. These activities all carry an increased risk, but these risks are generally accepted due to the greater benefits that are won from engaging in them. Watching violent movies provide entertainment and driving a car gets me to work. Remember that McCormick avoids talking about right and wrong. Instead, he utilizes the terms good and bad, whether an action yields overall good or bad consequences, to deem an action morally permissible or condemnable. Driving a car can therefore, in spite of carrying a risk of harm, be considered worth the risk because the benefits of getting me to work.

McCormick illustrates his point by using soccer as an example. He says that soccer is much more popular than violent computer games, and statistically carry a much higher risk of harm, both to the players themselves as well as the fans, than playing violent computer games, “[b]ut the possibility that there is something morally objectionable about football, soccer, or basketball on those grounds is hardly considered” (2001, p. 280). Instead of prohibiting the playing of soccer altogether, we accept the increased risk of harm, as we perceive the benefits of allowing the sport having greater weight.

This part of McCormick’s utilitarian defense of playing violent computer games is a relatively weak argument. He maintains, that engaging in activities with an increased risk of harm, such as soccer, is generally accepted as the entertainment value is considered to outweigh the risks. This reasoning rests on the reader’s supposed premises of generally accepted activities, such as soccer, being morally permissible. However, the fact that soccer is generally accepted does not mean that it is right, or permissible. It means that we engage in an activity despite it hypothetically being morally wrong. Alternatively, McCormick could be interpreted as wanting to argue that something is morally right by virtue of it being socially accepted. Luck, another contributor to the debate, quickly sets this argument aside, saying
that “unless one is willing to reduce morals to conventions, it certainly does not provide moral justification for this” (2008, p.32). The question is not whether or not we ought to socially accept the playing of violent computer games, but whether or not playing them is morally permissible.

To summarize, McCormick’s utilitarian defense of playing violent computer games, although not without its flaws, holds. His first, and strongest, argument consists of denying causal relations between playing violent games and performing actual violent acts. Research on the subject is suggestive of there being some link, correlational or causal, between playing violent computer games and elevated levels of aggression. However, due to inconsistent results, controversial methodology, unconsidered alternative causes for increased aggression, and hasty conclusions on such an increase being indicative of actual violent behavior as a direct consequence of playing violent computer games, there is not enough evidence to morally condemn engaging in such games. The causal connection between playing violent computer games and performing actual violent acts simply has not been established yet.

McCormick’s second, and weakest, argument for the utilitarian account, is that even if a causal relation between playing violent computer games and performing actual violent acts does exist, condemning playing such games because of their inherent risk would force us to also condemn other activities on similar grounds. Here, McCormick seemingly fails to realize that just because we generally accept and engage in an activity, such as soccer, it does not mean that it is morally right to do so. By referring to the social permissibility of soccer, and similarly accepted activities, he just diverts the question of whether or not it is wrong to play violent computer games, to whether or not playing soccer is wrong.

3. Kantian deontology
This section will briefly explain the basics of deontological ethics, and the Kantian form of the theory especially, as that is what McCormick uses for his argumentation on the matter at hand. Deontology is concerned with our duty, both toward ourselves and other people. Whether an action is right or wrong is dependent on its adherence to a rule, or set of rules. For instance, it could be my duty to obey the law, take care of my parents, or do physical exercise. Sometimes, deontological ethics can coincide with consequentialism, an action being right because it tends to yield beneficial consequences. However, unlike consequentialism, deontological ethics perceives the action as more important than its consequences. The duty to take care of my parents is right regardless of whether or not doing this brings about beneficial consequences to fulfill it.
McCormick chooses to involve Kant’s account of deontology in his discussion, as it features two principles that he considers relevant to the subject. Accepting Kant’s deontological view, we are given the Categorical Imperative, of which two different principles can be derived:

1. “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Kant, 1964, p. 30)

2. “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end” (Kant, 1964, p. 32)

This second characterization of duty is closely connected to the subject of violence. Disregard for another person’s autonomy, as is the case when committing unjustified violence against someone, is a good example of only treating a human being as a means rather than an end. McCormick here applies the notion of the bad sport, who when winning a game gloats, demeans, insults or is otherwise disrespectful towards her opponents, treating them as mere means to her ends of winning (2001, p. 282). However, this particular argument is limited to multiplayer games within which the player engages with other human beings, and only applies when a player actually behaves badly towards another player. As single player games only pit the player against computer controlled avatars, being a bad sport is eliminated as an argument for morally condemning them on these grounds. There is simply no other human being present to mistreat, and therefore no direct violation of Kant’s second principle is possible. As McCormick points out though, this is no direct argument against violent computer games, but only against the way a player might act towards another player within one, regardless of said game being violent or not.
3.1 The animal analogy

Nevertheless, single player games may also be susceptible to Kantian scrutiny, considering computer controlled avatars, just like animals, can be seen as analogous to humans. Kant does not consider animals self-conscious. He sees them as lacking of moral status, to which we have no duty. But cruel treatment against animals may in a transferred sense, he argues, cultivate a cruel disposition towards humans, making cruel treatment of animals increase the risk of violating the autonomy of other human beings, using them as mere means. Similarly, the Kantian may argue that computer controlled avatars within a computer game are analogous to human beings, and that cruel behavior towards these avatars possibly could increase the likelihood of cruel behavior towards actual human beings.

Does this analogy hold? McCormick does not think so. He claims that, even if a developed cruel disposition toward animals does spill over and develops a cruel disposition toward humans, it does not necessarily follow that developing a cruel disposition toward computer controlled avatars also develops a cruel disposition toward human beings. He states that “[p]laying a game, whether on the computer or on the rugby field, is not the same as real life. And beating your opponent […] is different morally and metaphysically from indulging in real cruelty on real animals” (2001, p. 283). McCormick claims that there is an unmistakably obvious difference between performing violent acts within and outside the boundaries of a game. Additionally, he refers to participants of many violent sports, such as wrestling and boxing, often having “the utmost respect and admiration for each other and each other’s accomplishments” (2001, p. 283), by which he wants to prove the lack of connection between engaging in violent games and actual violent behavior. I think McCormick makes a weak case here. He loosely argues for the difference of performing violence within and outside a game, by claiming some metaphysical disparity between the two. Without clarification on what this means, and not spelling these differences out in concrete terms, this argument has little weight in the matter. Also, participants of violent sports, despite having and developing respect for each other, may yet be developing a disposition of violent behavior. The one does not exclude the other.

However, Waddington (2007) claims that this analogy does hold. Many computer controlled avatars visually resemble real human beings, and he argues that in treating these badly we risk violating our duties towards real human beings as our dispositions to do so is developed. For instance, stabbing a computer controlled avatar in a game, treating him as a mere means, might increase the risk of the player becoming more inclined to treat real people
as mere means. Schulzke, also a significant contributor to the debate, (2010) agrees that representations are analogous to their objects, but that Kant here would not consider it a meaningful analogy. He claims that Kant, on the question at hand, would see the biological and psychological characteristics shared by animals and human beings the basis of a meaningful analogy. Consciousness, autonomy, and the ability to feel pain, are all missing in computer controlled avatars, and this lack of morally relevant factors “makes them superficial analogues” (Schulzke, 2010, p. 128). Acknowledging moral relevance with the analogy of a representation and its object, he claims, raises the question on whether it is wrong to mistreat other representations of humans on the same basis, such as burning photographs of humans. Schulzke does not think people would be willing to extend moral relevance to photographs, and that computer controlled avatars representing human beings are the same as photographs in all relevant aspects on this subject matter.

In short, the debate so far on the analogy between animals, computer controlled avatars, and human beings can be summarized as follows. Waddington claims that mistreating computer controlled avatars is wrong just by virtue of them representing human beings, an argument both Schulzke and McCormick refute by asserting that computer controlled avatars lack morally relevant factors exclusive to living beings, such as autonomy and consciousness. Moreover, Schulzke argues that granting representation of human beings moral relevance, in extension, would make mistreatment of art and photographs representing people wrong as well, a notion he believes few would concede to.

3.2 Is observed pain morally relevant?
I believe Schulzke overlooks the relevance of computer controlled avatars reacting to the actions of the player. Firing a gun at a character in a game often leads to the character in question falling to the ground. Sometimes the character just quickly fades out, but sometimes it remains, wringing in agony and calling out in pain, before it eventually dies. McCormick and Schulzke are both right in asserting that the character does not actually feel any pain, and the player killing it does not actually violate her duty towards any actual human being in the act. However, it looks like the character is in pain. Could not that fact be enough to affect her, possibly developing a character with an increased risk of harming actual human beings? I think so. A photograph of a person does not react painfully to me throwing it on the ground, or burning it, making it a different matter than a character in a computer game. With this, the analogy between a computer controlled avatar and a human being becomes less superficial,
indicating that there possibly is something wrong with behaving cruelly towards a character in a game\(^1\).

### 3.3 Accepting risks in a game

Schulzke points out that McCormick, although seemingly correct in his Kantian reasoning, fails to take the whole of Kantian deontology into consideration when defending violent computer games. The first principle, “[a]ct only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Kant, 1964, p. 30), can also be incorporated into the argumentation, a fact McCormick omits in his argumentation. For instance, “it is acceptable to kill the avatars of non-player characters or willing combatants” can be turned into a universal maxim (Schulzke, 2010, p. 129). The risks of playing a violent computer game often include having one’s avatar harmed by other in-game characters. Schulzke argues that the risks of playing such a game should be considered reasonably obvious and accepted upon when choosing to participate (Schulzke, 2010, p. 130). This makes the player a *willing combatant*, and harming her avatar in the game is allowed by the universal maxim, making it morally permissible. However, though Schulzke argues that potential harm to an avatar is agreed upon when starting the game, intentional psychological harm to the person controlling the avatar is not (2010, p. 129). This means that even if Kantian deontology morally permits me shooting another player’s avatar in the head with a sniper rifle, it does not permit me bullying or verbally abusing another player in a game with an intent to do harm to her person, as that is not sanctioned by the universal maxim. A very important thing to note is that this argument fails to only address *violent* computer games. Schulzke appears to have missed, or

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\(^1\) On a side note, technological progress will likely make this matter increasingly problematic, for two reasons. First, artificial intelligence becoming more and more sophisticated poses an interesting question with regards to the moral status of a computer controlled character in a game. What level of artificial intelligence is high enough to start considering it conscious? Or autonomous? Were we to acknowledge these characteristics with a computer we would have to thoroughly reconsider the moral status of computer controlled avatars within games, as these then would share several morally significant psychological characteristics with human beings.

Second, with computer graphics becoming increasingly realistic, and the continued development of virtual reality technology (on which we likely will see huge progress the next few years), the line between the real world and the game world will become blurred. When we can no longer determine whether a computer generated avatar is real or not, how will this affect the discussion at hand? Would such technology be unethical? Would game producers be forced to make games less realistic than what they are really capable of, for the sake of players being able to recognize what is and is not real? These two questions are bigger, by far, than what fits within the scope and time frame of this essay, none of which will be dealt with by me beyond this note.
disregarded, the fact that he has argued for how a player should act within any game, not whether or not it is morally permissible to play at all.

In summary, the Kantian defense of playing violent computer games is limited, but holding. Mostly, the debate on the Kantian approach to the subject is directed toward what kind of social behavior that is morally permissible between players in a multiplayer game, missing the point on whether it is morally permissible to play computer games at all, violent or not. It is also argued that we should not engage in simulated violence toward computer controlled avatars, these often representing and resembling human beings, which may lead to an increased risk of harming actual human beings. However, as there is no established causal connection between performing simulated violence within a computer game and performing actual violence toward real human beings, playing violent computer games cannot be morally condemned on a Kantian account.

4. Virtue ethics

Having provided a general defense of the playing of violent computer games on utilitarian and Kantian grounds, McCormick turns to the last of the three major ethical theories – virtue ethics, in which he claims to find support for morally objecting to violent computer games in general. As virtue ethics does not consider the morality of acts, as utilitarianism and Kantianism do, it can provide a new perspective on performing simulated acts of violence. Virtue ethics is concerned with the development of our moral character, focusing on who we are rather than what we do. The Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics provides one with the goal of eudaimonia, the state of being of a virtuous person. Aristotle said that reaching eudaimonia is a matter of utilizing our distinctly human capacity for reason. This means allowing reason to govern our actions. The most popular example of this is the situation of the confrontation with an enemy. Fleeing may in some situations be cowardly, and staying to fight may in some situations be reckless due to one’s opponent being stronger. Knowing when to run and when to fight – being brave – is a trait of the virtuous person. Aristotle claimed that the development of one’s character requires practice, as no one is born naturally virtuous. Therefore, subjecting oneself to situations with a choice exercises one’s ability to choose, and develops one’s moral character.

The main reason why the Aristotelian account of virtue ethics is chosen by McCormick is the self-centered nature of eudaimonia. A eudaimonic character is not pursued for altruistic reasons, to become disposed to help or be of use to others, as that would shift focus from the individual to other people. If an act is wrong because it cultivates a character that is disposed
to treat other people badly, then we find ourselves in the same position as the utilitarian and 
the Kantian, forced to prove that there is a causal connection between performing simulated 
acts of violence and performing actual violence. As stated, there is no established casual 
relation between simulated violent acts and actual violence. However, by not focusing on the 
acts a player may perform as a result of having played violent computer games, and instead 
center on only the individual, and moral development for that individual’s own sake, with no 
regard to how this affects other people, the Aristotelian approach avoids the arguments of 
causality set before the other theories.

McCormick states that on the topic of what is wrong with playing violent computer 
games, an Aristotelian would say that “by participating in simulations of excessive, 
indulgent, and wrongful acts, we are cultivating the wrong sort of character” (2001, p. 285). 
Playing violent computer games, subjecting oneself to violence, could be seen as 
desensitizing one to violence and enforcing virtueless habits. Developing the wrong sort of 
character, meaning the character that is less virtuous, creates a distance to the goal of 
eudaimonia. Since what Aristotle promotes is developing a moral character that lessens this 
distance, the Aristotelian, McCormick claims, must morally condemn the playing of violent 
computer games.

4.1 Opposition
The argumentation leads McCormick to condemn the playing of violent computer games in 
general on Aristotelian grounds. However, he fails to consider the whole of Aristotelian 
virtue ethics in his reasoning, one such instance being raised to attention by Schulzke (2010). 
Aristotle emphasizes the need for practice for moral growth, that no one can have the 
knowledge of whether to run or fight in a battle without ever having been in one beforehand, 
previously having had to make that decision and learned from it. McCormick (2001) takes 
this point and makes the claim that continuously performing simulated violence practices the 
player in immoral behavior, eroding her moral character and distancing her from eudaimonia, 
which an Aristotelian would condemn from a moral point of view. On the other hand, 
Schulzke points out that McCormick fails to consider the flipside of that same coin, namely 
that computer games can feature elements that encourages the development of the player’s 
moral character as well. Schulzke acknowledges moral dilemmas as such a positive element. 
As long as these moral dilemmas are meaningful; analogous to real world moral dilemmas, 
they can supply the player with a simulated moral situation without any harmful real world 
consequences.
4.2 Morally meaningful dilemmas

One of the games Schulzke (2009) considers consistently presenting meaningful moral dilemmas is *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), a post-apocalyptic role-playing game. In it, a mutant character named Harold once started having a tree growing on the top of his head, which eventually grew so big that Harold got stuck in the ground. This tree made a large area surrounding Harold, a previously barren wasteland, green and full of life, providing food for thousands of nearby villagers. The protagonist encounters Harold, who is in great pain and begs the player to be put out of his misery. However, Harold’s life is what sustains the forest around him, feeding thousands of people. This, Schulzke claims, is an example of a meaningful moral dilemma, analogous to the real world moral dilemma of euthanasia.

By having to make a decision whether or not to kill Harold in the game, Schulzke says that the player sharpens her ability to make moral choices, coming closer to the state of eudaimonia, all without having to deal with real world, otherwise potentially harmful, consequences. If we are to acknowledge that performing simulated acts of violence may enforce the player’s own tendency to act violently and virtuelessly, as McCormick (2001) claims, we also need to acknowledge being subjected to simulated moral dilemmas may influence her character in the opposite direction, positively developing her moral character. In the case of *Fallout 3*, which is a game that feature both violence and moral dilemmas, Schulzke assesses that a player of the game, although having her moral character slightly eroded by the in-game violence, wins the larger price of moral education.

As previously stated, Schulzke objects to McCormick failing to regard all that follows from his reasoning. Schulzke is inclined to agree that the violence in violent computer games generally has a bad influence on one’s moral character. However, he wants to make it clear that not all computer games can be morally condemned solely because they feature violence, as violence is not the only morally relevant element. Instead, Schulzke advocates a case-by-case approach, saying that each computer game needs to be assessed individually. One computer game may, despite featuring violence, contain morally meaningful dilemmas, outweighing the potentially harmful exposure to in-game violence. Schulzke would not object to these games, and would sometimes even encourage people to play them due to the moral education the simulations provide (2012). Another game may not come with the same amount, or level of sophistication, of moral dilemmas. As these are, according to Schulzke, unlikely to contribute to one’s moral character, he would probably consider these games morally objectionable.
4.3 Catharsis

Another aspect of Aristotle’s ethics omitted by McCormick, although picked up by Schulzke, is his view on tragedies. Immersing oneself in fiction was favored by Aristotle. In *Poetics*, he considers the pragmatic benefits of viewing and simulating various emotions in a tragedy, leading to catharsis – experiencing various emotions in a safe environment. He thinks that undergoing catharsis creates better people. Although the tragedy was a very different form of art than modern computer games, primarily because of the interactive element of the latter, the notion of catharsis retains its relevance. In fact, Schulzke (2009) claims that this element of interaction encourages catharsis to an even greater degree than being a passive spectator to a play.

This notion of immersion that Aristotle advocates with tragedies, and which Schulzke transfers onto computer games, is further explored by Sicart (2009). He claims that a violent computer game in which the player is forced to act immorally, such as Manhunt 2, actually is “designed to make the player enact an unethical experience, showing that there is no fun in committing these acts, but rather mirroring the lack of morals and the desperate situation of the main character in the fictional game world” (p. 89). Sicart argues that violent computer games that force the player to commit immoral acts, such as torture and rape, teaches the player ethical values.

I believe this is to be understood similarly to how Schulzke describes the benefits of in-game moral dilemmas, there being some educational value in being exposed to moral, and immoral, elements. However, there is a crucial difference between them. Schulzke sees the moral education only in games that feature meaningful moral choices, and which “give players thoughtful moral problems and multiple paths to resolving them” (2009, p. 1). Making the morally wrong decision in a game is still educational as long as the dilemma is “fairly calculated and have significant consequences” (2009, p. 1). Although Manhunt 2 can be perceived as a kind of moral dilemma, the player not having a choice but to perform gruesome acts in the game, it does not present the player with moral dilemmas the way Schulzke would consider meaningful. Sicart does not share Schulzke’s criterion for the manner in which immoral elements should be presented to the player in order for the game to be morally permissible to play. Instead, he claims that all unethical experiences within a game can be considered educationally beneficial in that performing immoral acts in a game the player will intuitively recognize the wrongness in her avatar’s behavior and learn from it, developing her moral character.
It is my opinion that Sicart, appealing to the player’s ability to identify the immorality in certain acts, may be putting too much faith in people’s intuition on what is right and wrong. I do believe most people are willing to acknowledge torture as immoral, but in a game where this kind of behavior is the only kind of behavior, lacking the contrast of alternative moral choices, I argue that the player just as well may hurt her moral character. Schulzke wants the player to be able to witness the consequences of both moral and immoral behavior in a game. Granted, Schulzke’s argument also appeals to the player’s intuition for recognizing right and wrong actions, but does so to a smaller degree, in that the morally meaningful dilemmas he advocates presents the player with a kind of moral nuance. Sicart claims that receiving only one side of the moral spectrum; in the case on Manhunt 2, only the consequences of immoral behavior, is enough for moral education.

4.4 The actor
The idea of catharsis above offers an entry into another analogue, namely that of the actor. Is the actor of a tragedy, or a play, doing something wrong when he acts out a violent scene? Intuitively, most people would probably not concede to this. The actor, granted that he is normal and does not suffer from any form of mental illness, obviously knows the play is not real, and no one is harmed in any apparent way. But let us go back to what McCormick claims about playing violent computer games. He says that performing simulated acts of violence we are cultivating the wrong kind of character, distancing ourselves from eudaimonia. Turning to the actor in a violent play, he also, like the player of a violent computer game, performs violent acts in a simulated setting. It seems playing a violent computer game and acting in a violent play are analogous, and following McCormick’s conclusion, the actor must consequently also be cultivating the wrong kind of character.

Given that this analogy holds in all relevant aspects, we are faced with either morally condemning both acting in violent plays and playing violent computer games, or morally permitting both. If we want to keep our intuition on acting in violent plays being morally permissible, then we need to extend this to the playing of violent computer games as well, which becomes an argument against McCormick, and his moral condemnation of such games. On the other hand, we could give up our intuition, and concede that acting in violent plays erodes an actor’s moral character, and therefore is morally condemnable. However, this renders the whole argument pointless in relation to violent computer games, neither adding nor subtracting to the discussion. At most, it becomes an argument against acting in violent plays. Lastly, a third option is to question the premises; does the analogy really hold in all
relevant aspects? This discussion is just briefly included to point out that engaging in simulated violence, if morally wrong on Aristotelian grounds, also extends to activities other than computer games. I will not pursue this matter any further in this paper.

So far, the argumentation presented suggests that a computer game featuring simulated violence can be defended on an Aristotelian account only if it features a moral counterweight, such as an element of moral education, heavy enough to tip the balance in favor of the player’s moral character. This is a compelling idea. Although evaluating a computer game on its level of in-game moral dilemma and weighing it against its level of violence (henceforth referred to as Schulzke Assessment) may be difficult, it could be done.

Moving on, are violent computer games that do not pass the Schulzke Assessment to be morally condemned? Is it wrong to play Manhunt 2, or Hatred? McCormick would definitely say so, solely based on the in-game violence, as would Schulzke after his assessment for lack of moral dilemmas. But I will argue that these games can be morally permissible, and that both McCormick and Schulzke fail to consider yet another essential aspect of Aristotelian virtue ethics – particularism.

5. Moral particularism
A normative ethical theory often involves an attempt to encompass all of morality within a set of principles. This is called moral generalism, and is prominently represented by major theories like deontology and utilitarianism. Deontological theories tell us to always do our duty, such as the Kantian principle never to use any human being as only a mean. Utilitarian theories advocate the maximization of utility, always to do what will, or is expected to, yield the best consequences. Both schools of thought, in their simplest forms, feature principles to be obeyed without exceptions.

In contrast, a theory can be particularist, denying the existence of moral principles and absolute moral properties altogether (Dancy, 2013). In the words of Kihlbom, “any non-moral property that constitutes a reason in one case may lack or have contrary moral valence in another” (2002, p. 27). For example, imagine a physician with two terminally ill patients, A and B. There is only enough time and resources to save one of them. Both patients have the same medical prognosis, but A is younger than B, and has two young children. Suppose the doctor saves A in virtue of these properties, and assume that he made the morally right choice. Kihlbom argues that the properties of patient A being young and having children are what made the doctor’s choice morally right in this scenario. However, he also claims that these properties may not be morally significant at all in a different scenario, or even being
reason *not* to save the patient (2002, p. 28). By this approach, each particular case can, and ought to be, individually judged, and all the features of a particular case should be considered.

Additionally, Kihlbom maintains that “the most plausible normative theory is a particularist version of virtue theory” (2002, p. 133), because it acknowledges the existence of moral values, yet without attempting to apply these to universal moral principles. Kihlbom speaks of acquiring a competence of moral sensitivity, of reliably being able to perceive what is morally relevant and significant in each given situation, and make decisions based on this competence, a notion clearly reminiscent of Aristotle’s ethics, and his doctrine of the mean.

There are several diverging readings of Aristotle, some of which propose that he had a generalist approach to his ethics. For instance, Hursthouse points out that asking what a virtuous agent would do, yields a specification of right action that “can be regarded as generating a number of moral rules or principles” (2001, p. 17). Each virtue can therefore be seen as bringing about an instruction, “Do what is honest”, or “Do not act dishonestly”. Since the acknowledgement of moral rules and principles is what constitutes generalism, virtue ethics can be read as belonging to that category.

However, Aristotle’s famous doctrine of the mean provides strong implications to particularism. The doctrine of the mean is about how one ought to act in each given situation, avoiding the extremes of excess and defect, and choosing the intermediate between the two, such as avoiding recklessness and cowardice, and arrive at the intermediate state of courage. Even so, Aristotle does not consider this intermediate to be the same for every situation, nor for every person. Instead he claims that the intermediate is “not of the thing but relative to us” (1926, p. 93). For example, it has been concluded that eating two meatballs leaves both Fred and Sarah hungry, but eating ten meatballs is too much for both of them. Having Fred eat seven meatballs may be just the right amount for him; his intermediate mean, but it does not follow that the same thing applies to Sarah. The right amount of meatballs for Sarah may in fact be six. Aristotle claims that this perspective holds for his doctrine of the mean, and that the morally right choice for one person in a given situation may differ from the morally right choice for somebody else in the same, or any other, situation.

### 5.1 Advice of the virtuous person

Does Aristotelian virtue ethics give any action guiding advice? Yes, it seems so. By imagining a person that possesses a complete competence of moral sensitivity, of which Kihlbom speaks of, we arrive at a method of giving our actions moral guidance. Now, this
method can be phrased in two ways: (i) asking what a virtuous person herself would do in my situation, and (ii) asking what a virtuous person would counsel me to do in my situation. As we shall see, these two may yield differing advice on what to do.

Next, we shall apply this method of action guidance to the moral question of violent computer games. Would a virtuous person herself play violent computer games? No, not if Aristotle was asked the question. His definition of a completely virtuous person, fully in the state of eudaimonia, is as close to the gods as humanly possible. Engaging in activities such as waging war, Aristotle saw as beneath the gods. It would be silly to imagine gods run around with swords and shields. Likewise, how silly would it be to imagine gods sitting in front of a monitor, playing computer games? Silly indeed. The only action fitting for a god is theoretical contemplation of eternal truths. Like Hursthouse (2001), we should perhaps adopt a Neo-Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics, disregarding elements we do not think belong in an ethical theory today, such as his archaic view on slaves and women. Disregarding the gods still leaves the Aristotelian with the state of eudaimonia, of being fully virtuous.

Moving on, one of the main arguments in this paper in favor of playing violent computer games consists in the potential educational value that may also be a constituent of such games. With this in mind, it is hard to imagine the morally educational benefits for a fully virtuous person, as she, by definition, already possesses complete moral knowledge. However, to a person aspiring to become fully virtuous, playing morally educational computer games, despite featuring violence, may very well be the right thing to do. As argued by Schulzke, presenting players with moral dilemmas in a virtual world gives all the benefits of moral education without the potential adverse consequences of actions in the real world (2009, p. 2).

This leads onto the alternative phrasing of the action guiding method: what a virtuous person would counsel me to do. Since I am far from virtuous, and I lack some virtues and moral knowledge, we can imagine the virtuous person advising me to play computer games that teach me these virtues, e.g. Fallout 3, as advocated by Schulzke (2009). So far, the virtuous person seems compatible with Schulzke’s claim, that a computer game can be morally permissible, or even encouraged, to play, if it features moral elements that outweigh the in-game violence and overall benefits my pursuit of eudaimonia. But what about games

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2 An unconsidered factor, that could further complicate this matter, is whether the mere introduction of a moral dilemma is right or wrong. Suppose a person is blissfully unaware of some particular torture method, or cruel behavior. Introducing her to the possibility of such behavior may cause her to adopt it, instead of teaching her the moral wrongness of it.
that fail the Schulzkean Assessment, such as Hatred? Would a virtuous person tell me to play Hatred? No. It is hard to imagine she would. There are other activities that can better benefit me morally. However, would she tell me that I should not play Hatred? This is an interesting question. Playing Hatred may not be the right thing to do, but it may not be the wrong thing to do either. Admittedly, not doing what is right may very well be considered wrong by the virtuous person, and that all we ever do should always be for the benefit of approaching eudaimonia. However, we can also imagine the virtuous person not answering this question, as maybe playing the game neither benefits nor hurts my pursuit of eudaimonia. I claim that such an answer, or rather lack thereof, can be interpreted as moral permission. If engaging in Hatred gives the player entertainment, without affecting her moral character in any way, neither negatively nor positively, playing it can be viewed as morally permissible. Granted, we are still left with the question on whether or not playing Hatred is bad for the player’s moral character. If it is, then the virtuous person would advise against playing it. It would be wrong, because the player’s moral character would be negatively affected by the in-game violence.

5.2 Violent games and particularism
Having established Aristotle as an, at least partial, moral particularist, we can go ahead and apply this notion to that of the argumentation at hand. McCormick views playing violent computer games as morally condemnable on Aristotelian grounds, but fails to recognize that his own argument, that engaging in simulated activities of violence erodes one’s moral character, implies that engaging in simulated moral activities could improve one’s moral character, such as Schulzke’s idea of using moral dilemmas for moral education. Schulzke says that we need to assess violent computer games on a case-by-case approach for meaningful moral dilemmas before we condemn them. This resembles a particularist reasoning, in that Schulzke advocates considering elements other than in-game violence in each particular game, such as morally educational elements, before passing moral judgement.

However, I claim that Schulzke, although on the right track with his case-by-case approach, does not go far enough to stay true to the particularist nature of Aristotle’s ethics. Instead of just assessing each particular violent computer game case-by-case, I say that this assessment in addition ought to include the player in question. For instance, say that Fred plays Fallout 3, the game which Schulzke himself raised as one such game where the featured moral dilemmas outweigh the in-game violence, making it a, in general, morally permissible game to play. Also suppose that Sarah plays Hatred, an AO-rated game highly criticized for
its meaningless and excessive violence, with an allegedly complete lack of morally beneficial elements. With the information supplied so far, I do not believe neither moral condemnation nor permission can be passed unto either player. As far as Fred is concerned, he may very well be greatly susceptible to exposure of violence, to a far higher degree than his benefitting from moral dilemmas. Furthermore, Sarah’s playing of Hatred may not affect her moral character in any significant way at all, due to her not being as easily impressionable as Fred. What this example shows is that a violent computer game morally permitted for its overall positive value to the player’s character, may yet yield negative implications for her character when considering each player’s personality. Similarly, a game generally judged lacking of positive moral elements may yet provide an entertaining experience for the player without any significant repercussions to her moral character. Recalling the earlier discussion on the virtuous person, we arrived at the conclusion that to the question if I should not play Hatred, the virtuous person may not give an answer, as it may be neither right nor wrong for me to do so. Furthermore, granted that Hatred does not affect me negatively, I claim that the lack of answer to this question possibly implies moral permission. Following this, it would seem that no particular game by itself can be judged morally permissible or condemnable in general for just featuring violence, without regard to who will be playing it. I argue that what we should be judging from a moral point of view is the combination of a particular computer game and its particular player.

6. Concluding remarks
As we have seen, Aristotelian virtue ethics cannot provide a general, moral condemnation of playing violent computer games. However, if we nonetheless want to find grounds on which to do this, we should perhaps circle back to utilitarianism, mainly for two reasons. First, we could question the form of utilitarianism that McCormick employs in his argumentation, that an act is good if it benefits people overall, and bad if it harms people overall. This is different from the traditional form of the theory, which states that an act is right if, and only if, it yields the best consequences. Using this more traditional form of utilitarianism may yield different results, such as that playing violent computer games always is wrong, because the time spent on playing these games always can be better, or best, spent elsewhere.

Second, rule-utilitarianism may be able to give a general, moral condemnation of playing violent computer games. Rule-utilitarianism is a form of utilitarianism which is concerned with the consequences of following certain rules, even if acting otherwise in a particular situation is expected to give better consequences. For instance, a rule-utilitarian living by the
rule “Do not kill” would never kill, even if killing a particular person would yield great benefit, as the benefits of always obeying the rule are even better overall. Now, let us return to the matter of computer games. We do not know for certain whether or not playing violent computer games is harmful, or to what degree players are negatively affected if it is. However, we do know that there is a risk that it indeed is harmful, one way or another. It could be that some people are negatively affected by playing violent games, and even if it only is one out of a hundred, this risk could be considered sufficiently significant to morally condemn the playing of violent computer games in general, on rule-utilitarian grounds. These questions both require further investigation, as the limited time frame of this essay did not allow for either of these to be explored here. Also, an interesting topic to delve into for future studies, in the light of the discussions at hand, is that of policymaking. Could we make a policy about who should, and who should not, play violent computer games? If it would show that rule-utilitarianism can morally condemn violent computer games in general, it seems reasonable for it to hypothetically be usable in the making of a policy regarding such games as well. However, this is a matter which needs to be further explored.
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