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The University of Texas at Austin
Center for Media Engagement
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Is It Only A Game?
The Ethics of First-Person Shooter Video Games

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold slaughtered thirteen people at Columbine High School with two shotguns, a semi-automatic pistol, and a Hi-Point carbine in 1999. Adam Lanza murdered twenty children and six adult staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School with a rifle and two handguns in 2012. Nikolas Cruz killed seventeen students and staff members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School with a semi-automatic rifle in 2018. Several qualities connect these killers with each other, but for some, one fact sticks out: they were all avid video gamers.

Many of the games that these individuals enjoyed are called "first-person" shooters, or games in which the player assumes a first-person perspective making it appear as if the player is, in fact, using the character's weapon themselves. In an article exploring concerns with such

games, Emma Lindsay says that it is "hard to find a mass shooter who *didn't* play violent video games." After a shooting resulted in two deaths at a high school, Kentucky governor Matt Bevin claimed that "we can't celebrate death in video games... and then expect that things like this are not going to happen" (Ray & Schreiner, 2018). Charles N. Cox, a former video game developer at

Screen capture: *Active Shooter*

Microsoft and Sierra Studios, wrote a blog post explaining that he would never work on a first-person shooter again, stating that "money isn't an acceptable stand-in for ethical behavior... just as legality doesn't equal morality."

Others disagree that violent video games share much of the blame in actual violence. Christopher J. Ferguson argues that any scientific evidence asserting violence in video games as a precedent to real-world violence is usually "methodologically messy and often contradictory." His personal research focuses on finding biases in scholarly journals, which led to his discovery that research articles finding a relationship between video games and violence were "more likely to be published than studies that had found none" (Ferguson, 2018). A meta-analysis done by Johannes Breuer found that any statistical relationship between violent video games and real-life aggression was at a level that could be "considered trivial" (Breuer, 2015). Emma Lindsay, however, says that "people who debate the question 'do violent video games make people violent?' are missing the mark... the question is, 'why

do we want to play violent video games?'... What is *appealing* about performing 83,000 virtual murders?" 83,000 is the total number of kills Adam Lanza, the Sandy Hook shooter, racked up on his favorite first-person shooter game, *Combat Arms*.

Some first-person shooter games have gained extra notoriety, despite sharing similar aesthetics to other shooter games. One such game is *Active Shooter*, an independent game created by Ata Berdiyev, who has now been deemed a "troll." The game is billed as a "dynamic SWAT simulator" and allows the player to play the role of either "a SWAT team attempting to disarm the shooter, or the shooter themselves" (Molina, 2018). Steam, a video game marketplace where independent game developers can test their game designs on a real audience, was scheduled to release *Active Shooter* on its platform, but they quickly pulled the game after lawmakers and families of shooting victims expressed their outrage.

While the ethical battle goes on, some video game companies are taking it upon themselves to create something of a middle ground. 2K Games has developed a game called *Spec Ops*, what initially looks like your typical warzone first-person shooter. However, it serves as an exploration into the player's own moral limits. Brian Crecente writes that "there was a moment in the game when I was asked to decide the fate of two men... instead, I opened fire on the people asking me to make the decision and it didn't punish me." The game offers a wide range of options for the player, and not all of them include killing someone. The lead game designer Cory Davis says, "Our goal is to invite you to have a deeper emotional reaction." Each decision comes with a different consequence, some that affect your fellow soldiers' impressions of you, allowing you to choose your rewards and punishments. "The unspoken choice here," Walt Williams, lead writer for 2K Games, says, "is 'are you going to obey the video game? Are you going to do what you're told to do?'" But the deeper ethical worry with any of these games is this: are we giving these games too much power by placing ourselves into the role of a "shooter" in the first place?

Discussion Questions:

1. Is it ethically problematic to play (or to enjoy) first-person shooter video games? Why or why not?

2. Is establishing a link between actual violence and enjoyment of these shooter games important to their ethical evaluation? Might it still be problematic to enjoy something that doesn't have many real world effects?

3. What is particularly worrisome about the *Active Shooter* game? How is it different from other violent first-person shooter games?

4. Is there a way to design and enjoy first-person shooter games in an ethical fashion? Explain where you think the moral lines should be drawn.

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