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How players manage moral concerns to make video game violence enjoyable

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Abstract

Research on video game violence has focused on the impact of aggression, but has so far neglected the processes and mechanisms underlying the enjoyment of video game violence. The present contribution examines a specific process in this context, namely players' strategies to cope with moral concern that would (in real-life settings) arise from violent actions. Based on Bandura's (2002) theory of moral disengagement, we argue that in order to maintain their enjoyment of game violence, players find effective strategies to avoid or cope with the moral conflict related to their violent behaviors in the game world ('moral management'). Exploratory interviews with ten players of violent video games revealed some relevance of moral reasoning to their game enjoyment, and several strategies that help players to 'manage' moral concern. Most importantly, respondents referred to the game-reality distinction and their focus on winning the game when explaining how violent action is a by-product of good performance. Findings are discussed in light of further theorizing on 'moral management' and potential links to the media violence debate.

Keywords: entertainment, violence, video games, moral management, enjoyment, theory, qualitative research

One of the most substantial and dynamic changes of the modern media landscape has been caused by the advent and mass diffusion of video games (e. g., Copier and Raessens, 2003; Vorderer and Bryant, 2006). They represent the most sophisticated form of interactive entertainment (Vorderer, 2000) and can evoke various forms and qualities of enjoyment (e. g., Klimmt, 2003; Grodal, 2000; Vorderer, Hartmann, and Klimmt, 2006). In communication research, video games have so far primarily been discussed because of their frequent, drastic and 'authentic' presentation of violence (e. g., Smith, Lachlan and Tamborini, 2003), which has been accused of facilitating aggression in (frequent) players (e. g.,

Grossman and DeGaetano, 1999). The available evidence clearly supports the assumption that violent video games foster aggressive cognitions, affects, and behaviors (e. g., Sherry, 2001; Anderson, 2004; Carnagey and Anderson, 2005).

With the 'General Aggression Model' (GAM; Bushman and Anderson, 2002), a theoretical foundation has been established that explains the processes and mechanisms behind the game violence-aggression link. GAM postulates a set of cognitive, affective and physiological processes through which exposure to violent stimuli (e. g., media portrayals of violence) increase the short-term probability of aggressive behavior. The 'multiple episode' component of GAM links these short-term processes to long-term, cumulative effects of violent stimuli on the formation of aggressive personality structures (e. g., desensitization and hostile beliefs about the world). Built on substantial empirical evidence and integrating diverse theories of human aggression, the GAM provides a powerful framework with which to explain the impact of media violence on aggression. Yet, little is known about how players experience interactive game violence, how and why they find it enjoyable, and how the obvious entertainment value of violent video games is linked to effects of game-playing on aggression.

These unresolved challenges are of great importance for media violence research. Potter and Tomasello (2003) report that individual experiences of media violence are far more important in explaining the media impact on aggression than the 'objective' intensity of violence displayed by the medium (see also Früh, 2001). Slater, Henry, Swaim, and Anderson (2003) have proposed a 'downward spiral' model for the connection between media violence and aggression. According to this model, preference for violent media content increases exposure to media violence, consumed media violence facilitates aggressive tendencies, which further increases preference for media violence, and so on. While Slater et al.'s (2003) longitudinal data support this conceptualization, the processes of the enjoyment of media violence remain unclear. However, the findings further back up the contention that progress in media violence research can be made if issues of media experience and the enjoyment of media violence are considered more thoroughly (cf. Goldstein, 1998).

The present article contributes to the exploration of the enjoyment of media violence. It is focused on players' experience and processing of violence displayed by interactive video games. It is important to note that video game players are not mere observers of other people's violent actions (as viewers are when watching a violent movie, for instance), but 'conduct' the violent action themselves. The interactivity of video games thus creates a close connection between players' self and the game vio-

lence (Vorderer, 2000; Carnagey and Anderson, 2005). How players deal (and cope) with the violence they perpetrate in the game world is thus highly relevant for research on media violence.

The goal of the present research is to find out how the interactive commitment of game violence can evoke enjoyment in spite of (or, alternatively, because of) the close connection between the violent action and the players' self-understanding as well as the moral sanctions that violent behavior is linked to in everyday life. In particular, we explore if the frequent and mostly brutal use of violence in video games gives rise to moral concerns in players (as it normally would in real life settings), and how players cope with moral conflicts that threaten the enjoyment of gaming. We argue that players apply selective and constructive modes of processing information to interactive game violence in order to achieve and maintain enjoyment. For this concept of 'moral management' (Klimmt, Schmid, Nosper, Hartmann and Vorderer, in press), we use Banduras' (2002) moral disengagement theory as foundation and starting point. Following the brief explication of this conceptual basis, we will report findings of a qualitative interview study with ten players of violent video games, and discuss the theoretical and empirical conclusions from the study's results.

The concept of moral management

Moral management is a conceptual proposition that attempts to explain the psychological mechanisms behind the enjoyment of violent entertainment media, and specifically the fun derived from playing violent video games (for a more complete explication see Klimmt, et al., in press). Its first basic assumption is that the enjoyment of violent media entertainment partly roots in different psychological processes and motives than those in place when using other entertainment media (Goldstein, 1998; Sparks and Sparks, 2000; Miron, 2003; Kuhrcke, Klimmt and Vorderer, 2006). For instance, the aesthetic pleasures derived from destruction (Allen and Greenberger, 1978; Kuhrcke et al., 2006) can contribute to the enjoyment of witnessing (or, in video game contexts, causing) the demolition of objects and buildings. Violence can also function as a cue for the high stakes of a competitive situation (e. g., in sports or crime drama) and thus increase suspense (Bryant, 1989). Additionally, committing violent acts in the virtual world can serve motives related to the negotiation and development of male gender identity, because it enables media users to learn more about topics potentially related to 'being a man', such as courage, honor, pride, fear, controlling one's emotions etc. (Kirsh, 2003; Jansz, 2005; Kuhrcke et al., 2006).

However, the representation of violence and the user's exposure to it may also challenge his or her enjoyment, which usually derives from the media's content. This is the second basic assumption of the moral management concept. It is justified by psychological research on individuals' emotional responses to real-life violence. Empathic reactions with victims of violent acts typically evoke aversive affective states such as mercy or sadness (e. g., Zillmann, 1991). Individuals who have committed violent acts virtually always experience aversive states due to moral perceptions of guilt (e. g., Williams, 1999). Violent video games allow (and often demand) players to perform brutal violent acts against a large number of people, monsters, robots, or other quasi-living creatures. In a real-life context, this would normally lead to extremely aversive experiences due to a permanent violation of moral standards (Bandura, 2002). In the context of violent media entertainment, however, this negative consequence of violence does obviously not always occur; instead, violence may even function as source or catalyst of positive experiences.

The concept of moral management tries to resolve this contradiction by proposing an explanation of how viewers and players of violent media entertainment cope with the complications that aversive responses to violence, well-known from real life, impose on their entertainment experience. The concept argues that media users adopt specific strategies that Bandura (2002) has initially proposed to explain the temporal suspension of moral standards, known as 'moral disengagement'. In a nutshell, Bandura's theory distinguishes a variety of cognitive operations that help individuals to make a violent act appear less problematic in moral terms:

- moral justification (e. g., committing violence to fight for social values such as freedom),
- euphemistic labeling (e. g., describing violent acts using non-violent words such as 'neutralizing' instead of 'killing'),
- advantageous comparison (i. e., one's own behavior is justified by comparing it with more condemnable actions of others),
- displacement or diffusion of responsibility (i. e., the individual responsibility for violence is transferred to others (e. g., 'commanders'),
- disregard or distortion of consequences (i. e., downplaying the consequences of violence),
- dehumanization (targets of violent actions are declared to lack human dignity and/or quality which makes them seemingly ineligible for moral concern about their faith),
- attribution of blame (justifies violence by arguing that the target of violent action deserves nothing but violence).

We argue that consumers of violent media entertainment apply these strategies to cope with moral concerns that could reduce their enjoyment. According to our concept, the repertoire of applicable strategies of 'moral management' is even greater in entertainment contexts than in real life.

The concept of moral management differentiates two basic categories of argumentation that consumers of violent media entertainment – and especially players of violent video games – (can) rely on. The first possibility lies in referring to the distinction between the world of the game and the social reality. Obviously, in violent video games no living creatures are harmed and no real objects are damaged. Dead bodies, blood, and injuries are nothing more than pixels. The non-reality status of video games can therefore be used to explain why moral concerns are not 'necessary', applicable, or rational in their context; there simply seems nothing to be 'real' in a game that moral concerns could arise from. Consequently, players are not required to cope with moral ruminations. This strategy to avoid moral conflict only makes sense in playful contexts and cannot be applied to real-life aggression. Thus, it is a specific operation available only to game players.

The second possibility for 'moral management' 'stems from within the game world and is supported by cues the game software provides (see Klimmt et al., in press, for a more complete discussion). For instance, in most violent video games, it is the players' role to fight for important values such as freedom or justice. This narrative game feature (see Schneider, Lang, Shin, and Bradley, 2004) mirrors one of Bandura's (2002) modes of moral disengagement in real life, namely the 'invoking of higher social norms'. Hence, violent video games provide the narrative-moral framework that justifies violent action. In addition, the opponents in violent games typically hold morally unacceptable positions (e. g., villains in crime drama) and thus 'deserve' punishment. By framing opponents as 'worth killing', violent video games create the narrative foundation for what Bandura (2002) has labeled 'attribution of blame', i. e., claiming the victims are responsible for the violence they suffer. In sum, the concept argues that moral management strategies that function within the narrative and logical context of the game (and do not rely on the differences between reality and game situation) are identical or similar to Bandura's (2002) processes of moral disengagement known from real-life violent behavior.

The moral management concept further assumes that video game content and form (e. g., dead bodies typically disappear from the scene after a few seconds, which eliminates a potential cause of moral rumina-

tion) provide ample support for players to identify and execute effective strategies. This way, violent games 'help' players to avoid and/or cope with moral concerns in order to maintain enjoyment. As a consequence, media users can exploit the entertaining capabilities of violent video games without the threat that moral concern (which typically goes along with witnessing or executing violent acts) would impose on media enjoyment.

In sum, the conceptualization of moral management suggests that users of violent media entertainment must actively contribute to make their entertainment experience happen. While the representation of violence can facilitate enjoyment in many ways, moral concerns related to witnessing or committing violence also have the potential to reduce or diminish enjoyment. Therefore, the concept stipulates a variety of cognitive strategies that avoid, suppress, or overcome moral reasoning during the consumption of media entertainment. The form and content of violent entertainment products provide support for the effective application of these 'moral management strategies'.

Because the moral management concept has been constructed based on references to Bandura's (2002) theory of moral disengagement, as well as on disposition-based theories of entertainment (cf. Raney, 2003), the propositions outlined here certainly go beyond pure speculation (Klimmt et al., in press). However, the concept is in demand of empirical backup. As an initial step towards empirical validation, an exploratory research design was implemented to find out if, when discussing how they deal with media violence, users of violent video games utilize categories that fit the concept's assumptions. A second aim of this exploratory study was to identify issues that might be pursued for more systematic tests of our assumptions.

Method

Qualitative in-depth interviews with ten German players (eight male, two female) of violent video games (both occasional players and heavy users) were conducted to gain exploratory insights on 'moral management' (see table 1 for a list of participants). Respondents received 10 as financial compensation for their participation in the study. To structure the interviews, a set of questions was defined that interviewers could ask during the conversation with the participants. An open, dialogue-like atmosphere was generated, and participants were invited and (implicitly) encouraged to talk as much as possible about the relevant issues. Interviewers formulated the questions in a way that demanded respondents to

think of their game experiences in much detail, and to report about their thoughts and feelings whilst playing very thoroughly.

Participants were asked to describe their favorite violent video game, their entertainment experience when playing that game, their criteria to determine the quality of good (violent) video games, and, most importantly, their thoughts and feelings when they commit violent while playing (e. g., “If you kill an opponent, what do you feel at that moment?”). In this context, the interviewers addressed the theorized ‘moral management strategies’ in case the participants did not mention them by themselves. Some assistance was offered to participants in case they had difficulties to respond to single questions (e. g., “Is killing opponents a problem for you? Why (not)?”). If specific theorized aspects of ‘moral management’ were not addressed by respondents (which occurred frequently), interviewers inserted related questions (e. g., “How important is it for you that you fight for the good and against the evil?”). If respondents made interesting contradictory statements, interviewers would point out the contradiction explicitly and request clarification. The list of moral management strategies that interviewers addressed was derived from the concept’s original formulation (Klimmt et al., in press) and included all major operations of moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002; see above) and the specific additional strategy ‘game-reality distinction’ (see above).

To create some diversity in the perspectives on game violence and moral issues, we recruited players of both sexes, of different age levels and with different gaming biographies (e. g., heavy user versus occasional players). Because the concept does not make predictions about individual differences in moral management behaviors, no solid basis for a theory-based sampling procedure was available. Instead, gender (e. g., Bartholow and Anderson, 2002; Lucas and Sherry, 2004), age as an indicator of development (e. g., Kirsh, 2003), and frequency of violent game usage (e. g., Anderson and Dill, 2000) were used as criteria to produce diversity in responses, because these factors have been linked to video game use and the issue of game violence in the existing literature. Conversations took place either in respondents’ homes, in university rooms or public venues such as bars. When it was technically manageable, respondents played a violent video game for ten minutes in the first stage of the interview and filled in some rating scales on how they evaluated the game, which the interviewer would later use as references for questions related to interest. Moreover, participants reported different favorite violent games, which further contributed to the desired plurality of responses. The interviews lasted from 20 to 60 minutes, and were recorded (audio only) and transcribed.

Table 1. Overview of participants of the interview study.

	Gender	Age	Education	Violent Video Game Played at beginning of interview session
1	male	25	university student	"Battlefield 2"
2	male	25	university student	"Medal of Honour: European Assault"
3	female	16	high school student	-/-
4	male	16	secondary school student	"Lord of the Rings: Return of the King"
5	female	26	university degree in communication	-/-
6	female	29	university student	-/-
7	male	19	secondary school degree	"Counterstrike"
8	male	22	high school degree	"Quake 3"
9	male	34	secondary school degree	"Star Trek: Elite Force"
10	male	25	high school degree	"Quake 3"

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to systematically describe respondents' view on moral management. Instead of a bottom-up approach, coding of statements was structured using the theorized processes of moral management. Each statement made by each respondent was checked for relevance to moral issues in violent video game play, and if we detected a semantical similarity with a conceptualized process, it was marked as a manifestation of (one or more) the theorized aspects of moral management. For instance, a statement about video game opponents who "deserving nothing else than death" would be identified as semantically related to 'blaming the victim' (see above), and would consequently be sorted into the relevant theory-based category. Statements that revealed related issues not covered by the conceptualization were sorted into a separate category. This way we were able to identify issues related to moral reasoning in the context of violent video games that exceed the horizon of the explicated concept, which allowed us to detect theoretical blind spots and insufficiencies. Statements of each category were then reviewed again and examined for patterns of description that could be construed from respondents' (as opposed to the concept's) formulations. As expected, typical descriptions of how players deal with moral concern turned out to display some overlap with the core definitions of the theory-based categories, but also emphasized aspects not mentioned in the concept formulation. For example, the notion of committing violence as a by-product of competition (see results section for details) turned out to be an important description of moral issues, which is to some extent compatible to the concept, but emphasizes a different focus (competition and winning) in the theorized moral management

process (disregard of consequences). Consequently, the analytic description of categories (i. e., modes of moral management reported by the respondents) was formed as a combination of the issues that respondents typically mentioned in the context of each moral management process and the applicable theory-based elements (implicitly or explicitly) reflected in the verbal data.

Results

The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed a number of factors that are related to the enjoyment of violent video games (which are, however, not of primary relevance to the present paper) as well as a set of different strategies players use to deal with conceivable moral concerns and potentially rising threats to game enjoyment. The responses frequently displayed a good general fit with the theoretical assumptions. In the following paragraphs, we will briefly describe each strategy of 'moral management' that emerged from the data and document it using relevant citations (translated into English) from the interview transcripts.

Game-reality distinction

Many of the respondents made the argument that game violence cannot be compared to real-life violence because of the virtuality of the game situation very early in the interviews. Because they hit no real creatures, several participants framed game violence as meaningless and morally irrelevant. As a consequence, they reported that they typically do not experience moral concerns when they perform violent acts and do not perceive a pressure to morally justify their actions. Statements that were sorted into this category thus corresponded clearly to the theoretical propositions on game-reality-distinction as one major route used to cope with (i. e., to suppress) moral concerns.

I know it is a video game, I know that it's not real, and I know, that it does not have any consequences for me. (respondent nr. 1)

It is very clear to me that this is something outside of reality and therefore not inside of my moral standards in reality. That is, I do something different, I can prescind, and it is therefore ok for me. (respondent nr. 8)

I am absolutely aware that this is only a video game and that there are frequently situations that are completely unreal. ... Therefore, I differentiate [between game and reality] very sharply. (respondent nr. 6)

Game violence as necessary part of (sports-like) performance

The role of performance and achievement for the enjoyment of playing games as well as for the individual style of playing was a dominant topic across most interviews. To achieve goals within the game was frequently mentioned as the primary source of entertainment and the key interest that motivates respondents to play (violent) video games. In this context, some respondents described violent actions against game opponents as a necessary part of competitive achievement; aggressive action is simply required to win and thus only a by-product of the competitive and performance-oriented quality of video games (as opposed to be a source of enjoyment of its own). Though this pattern does not fit very well with the moral management concept as proposed here, it relates to the strategy of ‘disregard of consequences’, because by emphasizing the aspect of ‘winning’ involved in most video game violence, other aspects such as physical pain or the destruction of a living creature are neglected. The argument that respondents made could be summarized as: “I want to win, but do not (necessarily) want to kill”. The execution of violence is justified by presenting a legitimate (i. e., harmless) intention behind those actions, namely the desire to perform well and/or to win a competition.

For me it was important that something was hit [by a gun shell] that ultimately somehow is important for the score or for my progress in the game (respondent nr. 8)

I remember a situation with the game “F.E.A.R.” ... when enemy characters guard a building, for example, and the only chance is to sneak to them from behind and to strike them dead or to shoot them as quickly as possible, because otherwise they would activate the alarm and then many more enemies would come ... I had no scruples, because I knew if I don’t do it this way, if I had to face a fair fight, so to speak, I’d have no chance. (respondent nr. 6)

You only try to move the crosshair to the position where the bullets should hit. You can only focus on dexterity, that has got nothing to do with killing. ... It’s only about dexterity, nothing to do with killing. (respondent nr. 9)

The task is to become somehow the winner within a limited amount of time by flooring others, as many others as possible. (respondent nr. 10)

Game violence as self-defense

Another type of coping with moral concerns during gameplay is to remember the fact that the targets of violent game action most often intend

to harm the player or her/his character. Therefore, players have to defend themselves; i. e., the hostile creatures of the game force them to commit violence. In respect to the theoretical assumptions, this “It is me or them” argument relates to the moral management strategies of ‘displacement of responsibility’ and ‘attribution of blame to victims’ (which are originally part of moral disengagement theory; cf. Bandura, 2002), because the attacking enemies are held responsible for the necessity to commit violence. Players thus disburden themselves from the intention to act violently, which certainly would belong to the morally problematic aspect of violence.

You have to stay focused, because you have to [kill] the other first, before you are hit yourself. (respondent nr. 3)

It’s simply part of the game that I have to shoot the enemy characters, because otherwise they would kill me. (respondent nr. 6)

Fighting evil: Narrative-normative justification of game violence

Some interesting and divergent positions were identified in respondents’ statements about the importance of narrative-normative justification of game violence. Some participants mentioned that they strongly rely on a narrative framework that puts them into the role of the morally good. This line of thought provides them with the legitimation needed to fight the morally evil. Other respondents, especially those who referred to multiplayer gaming, declared that they felt a narrative justification of their violent actions was less important or even irrelevant, primarily because they perceive violent gaming as competition. If some competitors (including themselves) were labeled as morally evil (e. g., “terrorists”), that would not have any implications for game enjoyment. Narrative information to justify violence is therefore apparently more important if the issue of achievement is not the only salient component of game enjoyment but, for instance, if identification processes contribute to the pleasurable experience (see Klimmt, 2003, for a related discussion).

For me personally, it is important that the game offers, at least, some ‘thin’ plot. Or somehow an alibi-story, so that I can justify for myself and also in the game why one has to kill. (respondent nr. 1)

In these games, the evil guys are always very very evil, therefore you don’t have mercy with them. But I am always sorry if an uninvolved bystander in the game is hurt, because ... there is a story in it. And then the uninvolved person is hurt. I don’t like that. I feel pity for him. But not for the evil guy, whom you finally kill. (respondent nr. 4)

I have played Star Wars Battlefield the other day, and I found it horrible, we had to shoot these Wookies. And they are the good guys! ... I would have had much more engagement if I had stood on the side of, from my view, the good guys. ... The more evil they [the evil guys] are, the more I like it. (respondent nr. 5)

I would not feel comfortable if I had the evil role. But a small terrorist attack now and then, I could deal with that. (respondent nr. 9)

For single player games, it [the story] is interesting, but not if you are playing with others. In that case, I don't care about the story. ... [in multiplayer gaming,] it is about winning. It is a kind of drive somehow to achieve position number one and to finish the others. That is just like sports. (respondent nr. 10)

Dehumanization of game characters

This mode of moral management was mentioned in different contexts. For one respondent, dehumanization was connected to the virtuality of the game and thus part of the 'game-reality-distinction' strategy (see above). At the same time, some respondents made a difference between human-like, authentic game characters and monsters or other non-human victims of violent game action. Still other participants emphasized that authentic humanity of game characters would add to game enjoyment; at least for these individuals, dehumanization was clearly not a typical strategy of moral management. They rather relied on the game-reality distinction.

If it is a realistic game, a world-war II shooter or so, I don't find it so important if characters are ripped apart when I hit them. But if it is a quake-like [i. e., horror/science-fiction] shooter with monsters and so on, then splatter effects simply belong to the game. It fits with the genre. (respondent nr. 10)

You don't feel mercy or something for the characters. Because they are made in the computer and they are not real, if they fall they can stand up again and in the next level, they come back. Therefore it is actually pure fun to butcher them. (respondent nr. 4)

I don't find it bad [to kill characters]. I don't see a specific person behind them or something like that. ... They [the enemies] all look the same, their faces. You cannot recognize anything, I mean their character or something like that. (respondent nr. 3)

The more of them I kill, the faster I achieve my goal. And I can't imagine an ego-shooter game in which, after I have shot three terrorists, I meet their families on the next level. Which would cause me to feel remorseful. But they [games] are not made like this. (respondent nr. 5)

Euphemistic labeling

Many respondents used euphemistic terms to describe their violent action in game environments. They obviously adopted a well-known military language, although the study also recorded a variety of colloquial formulations for violent action (mostly for killing other individuals). Some respondents, however, emphasized that using explicit terms such as killing would not cause any trouble for them.

And then they attack me again, and therefore I have to switch them off, so to speak. (respondent nr. 6)

I say frequently 'flooring' or 'finishing'. At least within the game. Before or after the game, I would also say 'shoot dead' or 'make dead'. But I think that happens less frequently within the game. (respondent nr. 5)

In general, it is about survival, and to switch off the enemy completely. (respondent nr. 1)

In addition to these strategies, some interesting responses that are related to moral reasoning were found in the separate category built to cover thematic, but non-theorized issues. They illuminate the process of moral management and how players perceive, process, and experience game violence. Some respondents pointed out that they do not have to override moral concerns in each situation of conflict and violent action. Rather, they make up their moral mind in the beginning of a game session; this general moral disposition (e. g., "it is only a game" or "I am fighting for the good, all evil deserves death") allows them to "switch off" moral reasoning and focus solely on the performance issues related to violent game action, such as precision, dexterity, and speed of reaction.

It is like I give myself the permission to dive into [the game]. And then I dive in, without much reflection what is happening and what I do, because I have, so to speak, justified it for me some time earlier. (respondent nr. 1)

I believe if you have accepted once that you actually shoot a human being and that you perceive it as a game, it is quite irrelevant in which context it happens. (respondent nr 5)

I know I belong to the good guys, and I have, yes, there are villains, and they want to destroy the world, and you have to do something against it. I mean for every game there is a kind of global justification ... I don't search for detailed justifications for the tasks I have to accomplish in the game. (respondent nr. 6)

Another interesting issue that emerged from the responses was that players find game situations not enjoyable when they induce strong and intuitive moral concerns. Interviewers repeatedly introduced the example of children occurring in violent video games, and respondents claimed to have a kind of automatic concern in such situations. Obviously, the standard procedures of moral management do not function well in such extreme cases, which some respondents also reported for other kinds of opponents, such as females, unarmed, or historically authentic characters. Too explicit representations of physical pain in victims were also seen as morally problematic.

In the game F.E.A.R., a little girl occurs now and then, and gives you some hints. And at the very end of the game, this little girl appears again, but suddenly attacked me. I remember that this came as a complete surprise to me. ... She was not armed, she looked physically weak, she was none of these big broad-shouldered soldier characters. ... And I thought that this is strange, I have to shoot her. I cannot shoot a little girl. But you really must do that to make progress in the game... That has caused me some emotional trouble. ... I think if such things would occur more frequently in a game, I could not play it. (respondent nr. 6)

If people [enemies] are not dead at once, but somehow lie on the ground and are still moving and so on. That reaches a limit. (respondent nr. 9)

If I think that I turn around a corner, and a child is standing in front of me and as soon as he moves I, because I have this tunnel vision "if it moves, shoot it", would shoot him, I would find that, I think, absolute shit. I mean, that would counteract my fun very much. (respondent nr. 5)

Finally, two more interesting findings should be briefly mentioned. One is the dominance of the performance issue in players' descriptions of

how they perceive and play violent video games. Reaching goals and winning competitions are obviously much more important than violent action per se. Some respondents even invoked the key role of performance to argue for the irrelevance of any moral concerns about game violence. While 'guilt' was virtually never mentioned as source or quality of aversive emotional experience during violent video game play, negative responses to underperformance was reported repeatedly. For instance, some participants told us that if they accidentally hurt a teammate in multiplayer combat games due to insufficient precision when targeting enemies, they feel shame because of the failure, but not necessarily guilt because they harmed a friend. This finding suggests that the focus on achievement and competition (see also Vorderer et al., 2006) renders moral reasoning unimportant.

The last interesting insight derived from the data is that there are apparently substantial differences in the experience of violent multiplayer games and single player games (see also Jansz and Martens, 2005). In multiplayer games, when typically teams fight against each other, no moral reasoning at all seems to take place. All that counts is that one's own team wins and that members of the opposite team(s) are defeated. It is apparently not important if the moral position of one's team is 'evil' or 'good' (e.g., if players occupy the role of 'terrorists' in 'Counter Strike'). If people play violent video games alone, however, narrative issues and processes of identification (e.g., with morally acceptable roles) become more important. Various responses highlighted the importance of a 'sense' that committing violence should have to make gaming pleasurable; most often, this sense seems to be provided by the narrative framework of the game, which differentiates the good and the evil forces in the game world.

Conclusions

The reported qualitative interviews produced interesting insights into the experience and enjoyment of violent video games and specifically the way players deal with moral concerns that would normally occur in perpetrators of violent action. A variety of statements indicates that moral concerns can indeed undermine game enjoyment, and that some sort of moral reasoning can be involved in processing the game content. Consequently, several of the processes hypothesized by the concept of moral management were well-reflected in respondents' statements. The clear distinction between game and reality was used as the primary answer to the question about moral concerns while playing violent games. It is, however, questionable if such differences are salient in the game situation (Klimmt et al., in press). This is because modern immersive video games

attempt to provide a highly involving and authentic experience that does not differ from non-mediated reality experience (cf. the concept of 'presence', Lee, 2004; Wirth et al., submitted for publication). The fact that players emphasized the game-reality distinction might therefore in part be a kind of ex-post rationalization that is rather specific for the interview situation than for the actual game situation. This does not imply that the strategy of 'game-reality distinction' is already or will soon be obsolete because of technological progress. But users of highly 'immersive' game violence of the future will – due to their high level of 'presence' – potentially face more difficulties in effectively coping with moral concerns, because it is not as easy to distance oneself from the violent scene as it is harder to remember that 'it is only a game'.

The responses also produced some evidence for the application of the (selective) processing of game content that reflected moral management strategies which function 'within the game world'. These were derived from Bandura's (2002) moral disengagement theory, and examples of such strategies are narrative-moral justification and dehumanization of victims. Some interesting links between modes of moral management (e. g., game-reality distinction backs up dehumanization of 'virtual' characters) were also found and are consistent with our concept. Overall, findings suggest that players mostly do not find it difficult to cope with moral concern; they frequently seem not to experience any moral problems at all. This might be because of the well-trained 'one-for-all' moral legitimization of video game violence that some participants had mentioned. It is less likely that the absence of moral concern arises from the frequently mentioned perception of violent video games as a solely performance-oriented environment. Some participants argued that violent video games are only about performance, and that violent action is only a by-product of intense competition. But some respondents also expressed the specific enjoyment that arises from the simulated killing of real people (instead of, for instance, the simulated killing of animals) with real weapons (instead of, for instance, throwing snowballs). So 'authentic' violence can contribute to enjoyment (see Goldstein, 1998; Sparks and Sparks, 2000; Kuhrcke et al., 2006), which would render moral issues relevant again. In fact, some statements suggest that extreme game violence (such as violence against children) can trigger an involuntary moral concern that is hard to 'manage', which suggests that there are limitations in players' capacity to cope with or suppress moral rumination.

While performance orientation can thus not explain away moral conflict in players, it is especially dominant for the enjoyment of multiplayer games, where social competition (but not moral issues such as 'terrorists who take hostages are evil') defines the rules (see also Jansz and Mar-

tens, 2005). Apparently, moral management does not apply to multiplayer combat games, but rather to single-player game situations where users appreciate narrative frameworks and a sense-making game world.

In sum, the reported findings support the proposition that dealing with moral issues is a cognitive task that players of violent video games have to resolve in order to maintain or enhance their entertainment experience. Therefore, the players' ways to deal with game violence display some similarities to individuals who perform aggressive behavior in real life. In many cases, 'moral management' is obviously easy to accomplish, as several respondents reported low relevance of moral concern in their gameplay. Nevertheless, moral reasoning is involved in the experience of violent interactive entertainment, so the present findings warrant further investigation of the moral management concept.

Follow-up studies should try to test if specific moral management strategies are applied if they are made available by the program. For instance, does it make a difference for game enjoyment if players are (experimentally) put into the morally acceptable versus morally unacceptable role of an interactive crime drama? Is provision of narrative-normative justification ('You fight for freedom') in the beginning of a game session sufficient to switch off moral reasoning, and do moral concerns occur more frequently if such justification is absent? Based on the findings reported here, specific research designs that test relationships between moral management and game enjoyment can be formulated. These designs should also overcome the obvious limitation of the current study, namely the social desirability issues involved in the interview situation, which may have led to over-rationalizations or other forms of misreporting of participants. If such systematic experimental studies would reveal further support for the concept, the next step would be to test the effects-oriented component of moral management (Klimmt et al., in press), which assumes that frequent application of moral management in game situations increases the capacity and motivation to perform effective coping with moral concern in real-life situations where violent action is one conceivable behavior option. As a consequence, moral concerns would have less inhibitory impact on the aggressive behaviors of players of violent video games, because players 'trained' in moral management would counteract moral concerns more quickly and effectively. This perspective on moral management would move beyond entertainment research and connect issues of media enjoyment (Klimmt, 2003; Vorderer, Klimmt and Ritterfeld, 2004) with the media violence – aggression debate (Anderson and Bushman, 2002; Bushman and Anderson, 2002). In particular, the acquisition and rehearsal of moral management capabilities during use of violent video games could turn out to be one mecha-

nism that links the consumption of game violence to aggressive personality structures. However, before such paths of violence effects are examined, the immediate steps to be taken refer to a more systematic examination of the connections between 'moral management' and the enjoyment of playing violent video games.

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