Chapter 35
Field Report:
Using a Violent Multiplayer Game as a Virtual Classroom for a Course on Violent Video Games

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on the transformation of a classical seminar paper presentation course into a completely virtual classroom experience beginning with the planning phase and ending with the students' final evaluations. The virtual course included homework lessons and online examinations. Findings on what is actually needed to accomplish this goal are provided, while demonstrating what barriers arose in the process and how they were solved. The course topic was the psychological impact of violent video games and included learning in virtual environments. An up-to-date internet multiplayer game was applied encompassing comprehensive communication features and non-violent interactivity of the players with each other as well as the environment. Beyond the classical paper presentations held via voice chat, accompanying missions for the game were designed to demonstrate the crux of the matter in a playful style. This included both real world procedures well known to the participants such as map reading and vehicle driving as well as rather uncommon ones like flying a helicopter and complex missions with different roles needed like emergency rescue or organized mass killing. This way, participants were able to compare their known real world experiences with virtual ones and evaluate the relevant psychological theories in a comprehensive virtual world. Further, participants could reflect on learning in general and especially on the learning of aggression in virtual environments in a depth that would hardly have been possible without experiencing the interactive phenomena by themselves.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Throughout this chapter, we will use rather simple definitions of the adjectives "real" and "virtual". By "real", we typically refer to entities that exist independent of a digital game world. These refer, for example, to either physical objects (like a map) or procedures in the physical world (like navigation), or to ideas and concepts like names of individuals, a traditional classroom setting, or a test exam. By "virtual", we refer to anything that is mediated by or brought to existence through a digital game.

Throughout this chapter, video games are used synonymous to digital games. By "gamer", we refer to a person who was already familiar with single or multiplayer online violent video games and therefore had an experiental background before course participation. By "non-gamer" we refer to a person who was video game illiterate before the course.

In line with the literature, we define aggression or and aggressive behavior as any behavior towards another individual with the intent to cause harm, and when the aggressor believes that the target is motivated to avoid the harm (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Therefore, dental surgery as a therapy to cure a complying patient is not aggression because the target is willing to accept the pain. Violence is an extreme form of harm. Please note that the harm is not necessarily physical. For example, insulting someone can constitute aggressive behavior if it is aimed to cause psychological harm. We define virtual aggression or virtual violence as any behavior in a digital game that would be aggression or violence if that action was re-enacted in the real (physical) world. Therefore, there is no necessary correspondence between virtual aggression and real aggression. For instance, if someone destroys or hides away an item in a digital multiplayer game *with the intent to cause harm to another real person* playing the game (for example, if it is an item necessary to reach the game goals), this is *real aggressive behavior*. However, if the destruction of such an item is a by-product of something *with a non-harming intent* or is done *by accident*, this is *not aggressive behavior*. Likewise, virtual violence is not real aggressive behavior if it is acted out in a rough-and-tumble play style, meaning that all persons concerned are complying to some rules including actions that are accepted; the play will be stopped if anyone does not wish to continue anymore (see Kirsh, 2006, for rough-and-tumble-play in the real word). Therefore, if all participants agree and comply to what is being done to each other in the game, virtual aggression is not real aggression. For example, a multiplayer death match in a digital game is not real aggression as long as everyone is enjoying it. This way, violent video games can be understood as a form of rough-and-tumble play (Bösche, 2009).

We stress that defining real aggression in a way that it would require real physical harm is an improper curtailment. It is the intention of real harm that matters, not the medium in which it takes place, nor the concrete way it is done. Therefore, real aggression in a virtual world typically consists of any behavior aimed at psychologically harming another real individual playing the game.

The Traditional Paper Presentation Course and its Shortcomings

The starting basis was a classical paper presentation course on violent video games. The course had been held several times, with up-to-date literature on violent video games and the psychological theories addressing their impact and learning of aggression. However, that approach had a typical shortcoming: since not all students can rely on a background of personal experiences with the procedures in violent video games and the phenomena arising from virtual violence, some talks were obviously reporting third-hand experiences, and confounded with incorrect information taken from the mass media or constructed by the talkers themselves. For example, once a student claimed