

Case 6: The Ethics of GTA VI

Grand Theft Auto VI's first trailer release in December of 2023 has garnered over 160 million views and broken the record for the most views ever on YouTube in 24 hours. With fans waiting over eleven years for its arrival, its expected release in 2025 is anticipated as one of the biggest of all time. Grand Theft Auto categorizes itself as an open-world game, in which players essentially have the freedom to do whatever they want in a fully virtual world. This includes things like playing golf, attending community meetups, and even initiating torture through kneecapping, electrocution, and dental extraction.

Grand Theft Auto has been caught up in several controversies for its violent gameplay in the past. Unlike other video games where violence is often scripted for plot development, GTA distinguishes itself by offering players a greater degree of freedom in the unpredictable acts of violence they can engage in. Players can hire and kill sex workers, commit drive-by shootings, and rob convenience stores, all simply for the sake of doing so. For many, the desire to play GTA stems from the player's ability to do things they can't do in the real world.

Defenders of games like GTA argue that there is no conclusive evidence that proves that violence in video games leads to violence in the real world, especially for minors. In the 2011 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*, the majority opinion wrote, "Psychological studies purporting to show a connection between exposure to violent video games and harmful effects on children do not prove that such exposure causes minors to act aggressively." Given that there is no clear causal link between the virtual world and the real world, there seems to be no apparent harm in allowing people to play such games. However, some may argue that establishing a link between violence in video games to the real world is not the only important criterion when considering the ethics of GTA. There are certain things one could do in GTA that would seem grossly outrageous.

If we imagine GTA VI coming out with the ability to readily commit sexual assault or violence towards children, for example, it is reasonable to assume this would be met with immediate backlash and understandable disgust from the public. In fact, after the release of GTA V in 2013, an Australian petition with 40,000 signatures argued that the game "encourages players to murder women for entertainment" leading to two massive Australian retail chains removing the game from its store. Some may argue that there is something uniquely wrong with sexual violence or violence towards children, making them off-limits even in a virtual setting due to their intrinsic moral repugnance.

However, if these acts of violence are intrinsically wrong, then why are other forms of violence like murder and torture allowed in such games? If GTA is about allowing users to do things they can't in the real world and existing research fails to establish a direct connection between virtual and real-world behavior, why are we

drawing this seemingly arbitrary line?

Study Questions:

1. Should violence be glamorized and trivialized through video games like GTA VI?
2. Where should we draw the line between acts of violence that are acceptable in video games and acts of violence that are not? Should we be creating a distinction at all?

1. Is the direct impact on the real world the only important factor regarding the ethics of video game violence? If not, what else should we consider?