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# Beyond Evil and Good in Online Gaming
# An Analysis of Violence in 'Overwatch' Between Demonization and Proactive Values

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## Abstract

Many studies have addressed and explored the effects of video games with an emphasis on violence and aggressive behaviors. This article's aim is to go beyond the simplistic difference between negative outcomes and their absence by suggesting the concept of "meaningful violence." For exploring possible instances of such a phenomenon, a content analysis (Gee, 2012) of online materials (online comments, user-generated content) from leading gaming media environments (Reddit, YouTube) was directed targeting the popular video game *Overwatch*. The theoretical framework adopted drawn its cornerstones from Educational Sciences, Philosophy, and Media Studies, spanning key concepts such as "symbolic imaginary" (Durand, 1963, Wunenburger, 1995) and phenomenological-hermeneutic analysis (Gadamer, 2004). Results point to an alternative overview of gaming violence, which puts in-game aggressiveness and sacrifice in a new light beyond counter-posed viewpoints. Implications are noteworthy for both researchers and practitioners, who can harness positive and proactive processes behind apparently negative attitudes and superficial measurements of explicit content and disruptive actions.

# 1.   Introduction

Online environments are often accused of being a bearer of hate and discrimination. The so-called "online up disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2004) would entail a toxic media culture (Phillips, 2015) in which individuals ignore face-to-face social rules and are more inclined to attack other users. Cyberbullying, trolling practices, and widespread hate campaigns represent ideal examples of such a trend, which is at the core of the relation between virtuality and reality in social media relations. On the contrary, the pro-active potential of virtual settings has been highlighted by several authors, from the strengthening of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Himanen, 2001) to creative and expressive opportunities (Jenkins, 2013; Wolf, 2012). In this article, a different perspective on virtual relations and violence is advanced with a focus on video game communities. The objective is to go beyond the simplistic distinction between positive and negative attitudes in digital entertainment's instances and uncover deeper interplays between these two extremes. By adopting an imaginary studies lens (Durand, 1963, Wunenburger, 1995), we focused on how practices based on sacrifice and exchange via violence shape players' interactions. For example, attention was given to how cooperative acts can work as community catalysts (Mauss, 1950) and how hostile behaviors can be depicted not just as aggressive and mocking instances, but also as relief valves and socializing glues. Indeed, sacrificial and immolating violence may play a meaningful role in players' activities and function as a balancing driver (Hillman, 2005) - whereas collaboration can be too demanding to handle and forces individuals to leave groups and embrace more solitary and segregated environments. The present inquiry was led by the key concepts of "symbolic imaginary" (Durand, 1963, Wunenburger 1995) and phenomenological-hermeneutic analysis (Gadamer, 2004), which provided the reference categories of inquiry. Empirically, we directed content analysis (Gee, 2012) of the online activity around one case study - *Overwatch* - selected by relevance (i.e., popularity and quality) and pertinence (i.e., an online gameplay that may encourage processes such as sacrifice, empathy, and altruism). Data (i.e., forum posts, audio-visual user-generated content) were gathered from *Overwatch* related Reddit.com's discussions and YouTube - relevant media platforms in which game meanings are developed, shared and taught.

The article is structured as follows: the first section introduces the debate about the relation between videogames, online settings, and aggressivity, suggesting an alternative perspective on media violence; the second presents the research design with key concepts and methods deployed; the third depicts the results, which are discussed along with future developments in the fourth. To summarize, *Overwatch* and alike products can foster a pro-active use of violence, in which aggressiveness is read in a new light and can even acquire a positive connotation.

## 2.   For an Alternative Violence

The relation between violence and video games is a highly debated one. In the last decades, several studies have explored the tie between digital entertainment and negative outcomes, among which lower empathic attitude and tolerance to violence (DeLisi, Vaughn, Gentile, Anderson, & Shook, 2013; Wan & Chiou, 2007). Such a perspective finds its roots in a deterministic perspective on technology and media. Over 20 years ago, David Gauntlett (1996) highlighted ten weaknesses related to investigations about media effects, among which: fabrication of data, empirical inaccuracies and mistakes, and oversimplification of the research setting. These critiques can be moved to several researches targeting the impact of violent video games. Indeed, Festl, Scharkow, and Quandt (2013) have analyzed how computer games can become a problematic consumption among young audiences, pointing to the influence of external factors like low sociability and self-confidence. Scholars such as Consalvo (2007), Gee (2005), Markey & Ferguson (2017), and Przybylski & Weinstein (2019) uncovered both the positive and negative potential and actual implications of new media technologies,

providing a less biased perspective. In addition, video games have been proved to support learning and comprehension when properly harnessed, and several titles have been addressing important topics such as empathy, intercultural communication, wellbeing, and cultural heritage (e.g., Gee, 2005; Schrier, 2016). A further issue regarding the concept of violence itself, which is perceived differently according to the academic perspective chosen. For instance, some media scholars focus on aggressive behaviors (the intention to harm), while others emphasize the presence of explicit content (e.g., gore and blood) (Markey, Markey & French, 2015; Prescott, Sargent, & Hull 2018). The intent of this article is not to deepen such a controversial topic but rather to go beyond the distinction between addicting/toxic and neutral/superficial outcomes by exploring an alternative perspective on violence in online gaming. We claim that, although negative dynamics may be present and enforced through in-game violence (and vice versa), aggressiveness can execute positive functions as well and especially in the interaction with others.

Indeed, the aforementioned definitions of violence rely on a simplistic premise: violence is a negative variable of the experience. At the same time, context and conditions seem not to matter in the equation. However, scholar works in the field of depth psychology (Hillman, 2005; Jung 1944, 1956) have shown that aggressiveness, rage, and similar feelings - related to the psychic dimension called *shadow* (Jung 1944, 1956) - represent a complex phenomenon of integration and re-elaboration of negative impulses. According to the symbolic imaginary theory (Durand, 1963; Wunenburger, 1995) unpleaseant emotions donot refer to personality aspects to cure or prevent but, rather, to constitutive and even generative processes in any culture.; . From this perspective the alternation of *nocturnal* and *diurnal* (e.g., positive and negative, peaceful and violent) images provides a biological, psychological, and social balance in human life. The challenge is to comprehend if in-game violence can go beyond the mere incitement of hostile behaviors. Indeed, video-ludic aggressiveness may support a more complex function spanning compensatory and reformulating dynamics, strengthening but also weakening violent attitudes. In other words, the challenge is to test if mediated ludic violence may constitute a positive outburst - a symbolic environment where it is possible to express and manage negative feelings in a proactive way rather than repress them (Bettelheim, 1987).

The *game of war* (of competition, of clash), which has always been present in both human and animal worlds, was studied by Huizinga (1980), who considered war and challenge crucial components of the ludic tension. Within the magic circle, which is delimited by boundaries that differentiate game and real-life environments, it is possible to experiment with a safe space where behaviors, dynamics, and relations whose effects do not have real consequences (Caillois, 1958). According to Huizinga (1980), therefore, games are at the core of the beginning of cultures: they allow experiencing emotions *in fictional ways*, downgrading potentially dangerous actions that might destroy society and social cohesion. On the contrary, games let us act in a mediated and controlled way, which is ritualized through symbols and cultural forms - e.g., duels, sports challenges and competitions in general where violent outcomes are mitigated with rules but preserving the symbolic potential of "agon" (Caillois, 1958). For instance, *battagliola* is a violence-based game played for centuries that refers to any kind of fight opposing children factions and involving stones, sticks, or slings. Evidence of Battagliola has been found in ancient times and all around the world, while this ludic practice went under the name of *ludus ad ferutas* in Middle Ages (Antonacci & Della Misericordia, 2013; Niccoli, 2007).

By adopting this perspective, violent video games become just the last example of a complex cultural phenomenon relying on the use of violence in a controlled setting; such a practice has been following human beings since the beginning, dealing with their aggressive and opposing nature (Hillman, 2005). It is worth mentioning that in video games, violent acts are staged by the player (like in Battagliola and other war-based games); violence is not experienced passively (like in movies) but processed via technology. This mediation entails a new relation between actions and outcomes and triggers a particularly estranging effect. From these premises, we suggest that ludic functions of violence involving video games can fall into the following categories:

- **Compensatory** (surge) (Bettelheim, 1987). This function allows to stage violent behaviors with no consequences in real life: "Playing war allows you to free yourself of frustrations and then weakens them. Therefore, children [playing this game] will be able to control aggressive feelings easier" (Bettelheim, 1987, 215). The compensatory dimension of games occurs at any life step when an aggressive impulse is overturned by a symbolic action (e.g., pushing the hit button), which lessens the overall destructive and disruptive input because it is experienced within the protected magic circle. This function is related to the individual psychological dimension, harnessing the functional violence for expressing their energies and recovering the emotional equilibrium.

- **Representative** (with a ritual component) (Turner, 1982). The representative function has been widely explored by Turner with his theories about social drama (1982, pp. 89-101). Turner argues that when our everyday life routine is disrupted by a "break," triggering a crisis, we tend to use specific rituals for restoring the lost situation. Therefore, new balances may occur, addressing the outcome of such a change (Turner, 1982, 92). This ritualized action (that can be actualized through festivals, performing arts, media, and games) allows people to experience difficult situations and conditions in a mediated way. With the ritual, the individual is involved with a *representation* of a critical situation, where real consequences are avoided, and it is easier to find solutions and counter-strategies. With games, the representative dimension is crucial because the ludic experience is a mediated act within a fictional environment. The contenders may represent their violence conveying aggressive energies and experiencing their outcomes safely. Therefore, violence can be exploited in a creative way and acquire an aestheticizing function (like art); a poetic form that can generate innovation and change.

- **Sacrificial** (related to a sacred dimension) (Girard, 1979). The sacrificial function has been mainly studied by Girard (1979), who argues that sacrifice is the foundation of the cultural dimension of human societies. The sacrificial violence (e.g., the immolated animal) has a cathartic and unifying value because the victim is put in-between hostile factions in order to prevent conflicts. The sacrifice is a crucial act of *substitution* for stopping spirals of revenge, which would entail an endless process of annihilation (Girard, 1979). In a ludic environment, this practice can have several connotations: players can destroy an expandable subject and strengthen group bonds; otherwise, it is possible to observe auto-immolations, in which a player sacrifices himself/herself for the group survival.

- **Amplificatory** (which triggers violent behavior). The amplificatory function implies that media exposure to violent content (e.g., in movies, video games) triggers aggressive behaviors in real life through mimicking. This type of violence is probably the most debated one in video game-related literature, from psychological lenses to pedagogical approaches (e.g., Bushman & Gibson, 2011; DeLisi, Vaughn, Gentile, Anderson, & Shook, 2013). A leading viewpoint of such a lens is that aggressive emotions remain after the media consumption influencing other everyday life aspects and habits with deviant results. In other words, the violence experienced during the play would foster a hostile attitude able to cross virtual boundaries and frames.

The four functions are often tied together in the interaction between players, games, and broader contexts. They are here differentiated for analytical and clarity reasons, but they are intertwined in dynamic relationships. Moreover, they are aligned with the viewpoint of several game designers (Koster, 2010; Adamas & Dormans, 2012), who argue that aggressiveness is as old as humankind; being video games intrinsically human, they would be shaped by a disruptive – and then addictive - impulse (Caillois, 1973; Dow Schüll, 2012). In such dynamics, which are socially grounded, online communities and environments are playing an increasingly important role. In-game violence (and

playing itself) is more and more debated and consumed aside from the game (Gandolfi, 2018; Consalvo & Vazquez, 2015; Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Portals like YouTube, Reddit, Twitch.tv, and Discord are environments where individuals share in-game materials, discuss strategies and ideas, and strengthen connections and relations. They work as media platforms – i.e., spaces with computational (technical schemes with specific affordances and constraints), figurative (new possibilities of action and thinking), and political (a tool for political goals and debates) implications (Gillespie, 2010, 349–350). As argued by Svelch (2016), the second and third types of outcomes are still overlooked by the literature, with an emphasis on the technical infrastructure (Montfort & Bogost, 2009; Apperley & Parikka, 2015). However, audiences are getting increasingly important and autonomous in negotiating and debating cultural objects, among which video games (Gosling & Crawford, 2011; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Wolf, 2012). In these settings, discussions about violence can follow four different connotations (inspired by the semiotic square by Floch, 1995)

- Ludic (escapist values): violence as a divertissement with no concrete implications.

- Critical (critic values): violence as a prompt to criticize and problematize games, players, and so on.

- Practical (pragmatic values): violence as a tool for pragmatic reflections and considerations within and beyond the ludic boundaries;

- Utopian (existential values): violence as a way to think about relevant issues and themes.

These four categories describe the values that the types of violence introduced above may acquire. In other words, they point to the concrete shape that *ground* compensatory, amplificatory, representational, and sacrificial violence in online settings. The ludic orientation can be referred to as the most superficial one, while others see violence as a tool for critique, reflection, and discussion. For instance, sacrificial in-game violence can enable a group discussion about how a) players tend to act by themselves (critical), b) players should find better ways to collaborate (practical) or c) people are usually driven by self-preservation. Reflecting on how game violence is debated and negotiated online addresses another debate in the literature - if and how digital environments facilitate or mitigate disruptive behaviors. Indeed, games with multiplayer features entail a further layer of analysis (and potentially risk,) i.e., the aggressive (also called toxic) attitude spread across several virtual communities related to digital gaming and beyond. Even here, it is well-known that academic positions are radicalized, from overviews of supportive trends across the internet (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Muriel & Crawford, 2018) to more pessimistic takes, mentioning GamerGate and Alt-Right groups activities on Reddit and 4Chan (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Mortensen, 2016). This article aims to address such a gap by reading in-game violence through game-related media platforms, which can influence identity, self-expression, and media consumption. Being the aforementioned interpretations of *meaningful violence* social and relational at their core, these settings can work as ideal places for detecting related instances and reflecting on how in-game violence is perceived and shaped by audiences themselves.

## 3.   Research Design

According to this framework, an investigation has been conducted targeting possible proactive violence in association with *Overwatch*, one of the most popular online First-Person Shooters. More specifically, we have explored leading online environments - Reddit and YouTube - where aggressiveness, sacrifice, and related topics are framed and interpreted because of the social and interactive dimension that proactive violence implies. The leading research questions were the following ones:

RQ1 -    Are there any instances of proactive violence in video games that go beyond the simplistic distinction between negative effects and superficial outcomes?

RQ2 -    Is it possible to find supportive online environments where this violence is debated and discussed with neither toxic nor denigrating connotations?

The aforementioned types of violence functioned as core criteria of analysis. For each, two related keywords (i.e., sacrifice, immolation, violence, aggressiveness, surge, compensation, fury, rage) were used for searching materials on Reddit (in Overwatch-related channels) and YouTube (general search). The leading 10 videos of the former (by comments) and the first 10 discussions (by posts) were analyzed. Data gathering was directed in incognito mode for preventing the algorithm's influence. Results in languages other than English and with inappropriate (i.e., explicit) or non-pertinent (e.g., off-topic despite the title) content were not considered. Therefore, a quantitative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002) with a discourse orientation has been deployed to collect the leading "conversations" – i.e., the core debating topics (Gee, 2012, 28-29) - about alternative in-game violence. The main analytic unit was the "stance," which is a group of interactions (in this study, related comments) tied together (p. 96). The first analytic labels for framing the textual content were the four types of violence mentioned above. The intent was guided according to three ''building tasks'': (1) significance, that is, what and who is relevant; (2) practice, what activities are under the spotlight; and (3) connection, which relations between elements (e.g., traits, practices) are significant (Gee, 2012, 102). Therefore, the resulting discussions (stances) were framed in terms of valorizations (see above) and discussing orientation; the latter measure was categorized as follows (inspired by the coding/decoding model; Hall, 1973):

- Supporting: users tend to agree with the triggering content of the discussion (a video or a post) and with each other;

- Conflictual: users disagree with the triggering content of the discussion and with each other;

- Constructive: users negotiate and create new meaning from the triggering content, which becomes an opportunity for discussion and reflection.

The reference is to direction and value of the whole thread (Reddit) or video's comment and not just the first post, which could struggle with the main orientation that leads the discussion (e.g., a negative start that generates opposite and then positive reactions). Such labels were assigned according to the orientation of the majority of posts and derived from previous research on game-related forums and media platforms (Gandolfi, 2017; Antonacci, 2018). To summarize, we aimed to see if game violence can be seen in a new light through a *double edge sword* test - i.e., social media, which both embed collectivity but also toxicity. Data were collected in October/November 2018 under the supervision of the Kent State University Institutional Review Board.

*Overwatch* has been selected for two main reasons. First, it potentially includes all the four types of violence due to its mechanics; second, its community is particularly active, providing an extensive source of players' conversations and exchanges. The game was published in May 2016 by Activision Blizzard for PC and major home consoles. It can be defined as an economic success with over 35 million players in 2017. Its gameplay relies on First Person Shooter mechanics with a strong teamwork component: 6 player-squads fight against each other in different modalities, from attack/defense to team deathmatch and capture-the-flag. Players can select from a wide roster of heroes with peculiar abilities that have to be combined, from healing and damage-taking to offense and support. This variety allows a remarkable dynamism in terms of in-game behaviors, tactics, and practices, with a strong echo in related media environments, from Reddit to YouTube. YouTube has been chosen because it is the leading video platform with more than 1.8 billion users every month. The variety of *Overwatch*-related videos is remarkable (the official game channel on this website has almost 2.5 million followers), as well as the number of user-interaction. Reddit is popular as well, with 542 million

monthly visitors (234 million unique users); this discussion website hosts several *Overwatch* groups (the official one has 1.5 million members). These digital settings were targeted because of their diffusion, debating features (comment section, possibility to reply to single posts) and mutual differences (YouTube is based on videos while Reddit relies on several types of content, from short clips to text messages).

## 4. Results

Table 1 provides a complete overview of the results according to violence type, source, comments - number (n:), mean (m), standard deviation (sd), overall stances number (st), valorization and orientation (each with the number of stances involved), and highlights.

**Table 1: Results**

| Source | N:comments (m/sd/st) | Valorization (st) | Orientation (st) | Highlights |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Sacrificial** | | | | |
| Reddit | 1594(159.4/87.26/46) | Ludic (26) practical (16) Utopian (4) | Supporting (29) constructive (12) Conflictual (5) | - Leading role of Reinhardt (other characters: Tracer, Div.A, Roadhog, Mercy); hook/charge <br> - Importance of lore and world narrative <br> - Main dialectic between instrumental and non-instrumental values |
| YouTube | 953(95.3/118.19/25) | Ludic (14) Practical (8) Critical (3) | Supporting (13) Constructive (8) Conflictual (4) | - Leading role of Reinhardt (other characters: Roadhog, Wilson, Mercy) <br> - Iron Giant reference (related to a final sacrifice) <br> - Div.A as main nemesis |
| **Compensatory** | | | | |
| Reddit | 917(91.7/102.16/21) | Ludic (14) Critical (5) Utopian (3) | Supporting (16) Conflictual (2) Constructive (3) | - Ultimate has core mechanic <br> - Collaboration as reference driver <br> - Main dialectic between instrumental and non-instrumental values |
| Youtube | 348(34.8/15.7/10) | Ludic (7) Critical (2) Practical (1) | Supporting (8) Constructive (2) | - Ultimate as core mechanic <br> - Div.A and Groundhog as reference characters |
| **Representative** | | | | |

| Source | N:comments (m/sd/st) | Valorization (st) | Orientation (st) | Highlights |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reddit | 478(47.8/27.49/15) | Ludic (11) Utopian (4) | Supporting (13) Constructive (2) | - Importance of pre-game/post-respawn rituals <br> - Ritualized violence as stress/aggressiveness killer <br> - Ritualized violence beyond instrumental violence |
| Youtube | 251(25.1/23.51/7) | Ludic (6) Critical (1) | Supporting (6) Conflictual (1) | - Ritualized violence as stress/aggressiveness killer  -ritualized violence beyond instrumental violence <br> - In-game animations as rituals. |
| **Amplificatory** | | | | |
| Reddit | 9284 (92.84/658.43/235) | Critical (76) Practical (112) Utopian (47) | Supporting (128) Conflictual (16) Constructive (91) | - Reference violence is not embedded in the game, but in the community <br> - Dialectic between community and developers <br> - Ambiguous role of collaboration <br> - Tie to perspectives on humankind and self-criticism |
| Youtube | 18237(1823.7/883.99/497) | Ludic (257) Critical (67) Practical (145) Utopian (28) | Supporting (278) Conflictual (96) Constructive (123) | - Toxicity is explained and even justified with reflections on game heuristics <br> - Domestication of toxicity <br> - Healing characters as main targets |

It can be argued that the first three types of violence mainly generated ludic and supporting instances, where commenters appreciate the triggering post/video, give feedback and insights, and share similar in-game experiences expanding the scope of the discussions. Violence becomes an opportunity of consensus and cohesiveness in its sacrificial, representational, and compensatory declinations. Either toxicity nor trolling practices emerged as leading trends. Moreover, these *alternative violences* and their celebration valorize game dynamics beyond their mere instrumental functions. For example, sacrificing a character is not always an effective strategy, but it is appreciated by the majority of the users observed because it is a sign of altruism, generosity, and even identification with lore and virtuous heroes (especially Reinhardt, whose main mission is to protect others) (see Table 2 for more detailed highlights). For instance:

> User1:   That's some Bible stuff right there.
> User2:   You died for your team and was rewarded with another shot at life.
> User3:   Nice.
> (...)

> User1: People don't like simple minds, they love the heroes that sacrifice themselves for the team... even though everyone forgets that by the end of the match :(

(sacrificial violence on Reddit)

**Table 2: Highlights**

| Type (platform) | Example |
|---|---|
| Sacrificial (YouTube) | - Look folks as a Reinhardt main I can confirm that you start to kind of think like Rein. You dont pop the shield because it isnt as epic and badass as it is to go out sacrificing yourself to stop the nuke. (...)<br><br>- i did this once but as roadhog, it was nepal's point the match was in overtime both teams at 99% I'm being pushed near the edge by a junkrat, i had just used my whole hog in hopes to push the enemy off the point, then i see a d.va pop her ultimate into the point. I chuck my hook at it hoping to detour its path as i hooked the mecha the junk rat blew me off the edge using his mine, i'm going off the edge along with the mecha, I knew I had done a good thing. that mecha would of killed my whole team.<br><br>(...)<br><br>- That was epic! |
| Compensatory (Reddit) | - That slam cured my depression, watered my crops and made my vision clear.<br><br>- That ultimate brought me back to reality.<br><br>(...)<br><br>- I've planted a dva nuke on the door as its closing and it got sealed inside too. I laughed for like a minute straight.<br><br>- "To give the red team back their bomb."<br><br>- That's my line |
| Reppresentative (Reddit) | - If a single enemy encounters me way off the beaten path, I will always emote with them. It is the way of things.<br><br>- I have made truces in competitive by emoting next to the objective sometimes. Its even better when you still end up winning despite the shenanigans.<br><br>- I started a game on King's Row as Reinhardt, charged as soon as I spawned, and proceeded to charge straight into a charging doomfist coming around a corner, knocking us both down. We were friends for the rest of the game.<br><br>- Those are the types of bonds that last for lifetimes |
| Amplificatory (YouTube) | - I've noticed videos on Facebook and YouTube saying how much of a toxic player you are, but most of the time I see them being toxic to you because what your a girl and is better than most guys on overwatch? I give huge props to you and hope I can be as good as you ^_^ I'm a Mercy main but don't want to be a Mercy main for the rest of my overwatch career XD<br><br>- Watch out, Mercy mains are always targeted for bullying (unless your godlike then your fine)<br><br>- Anybody can have a bad game and already be called trash :/ ruins the game<br><br>- I know 😊 just Mercy is always targeted for "easy controls" which confuses me |

The amplificatory violence is surrounded by a weaker - but still relevant - support orientation; indeed, there are also several constructive stances. The related valorization is variegated, from ludic drivers - in-game violence as an innocent effect with no real consequences - to pragmatic debates - how to handle aggressive behaviors from other players. Violence is considered both a part of *Overwatch* (a divertissement) and a key to read game community and developers and reflect on their active role in framing the game lifespan. For instance,

User1:  anyone who has run online communities on the Internet for the past 30 years. Or just played literally any online game ever. Every single online game with a large following is toxic as [language]. Counter-Strike is toxic. . . . League/DotA are toxic. Fighting games are toxic. The degrees vary, but people are shitty in all of them. . . . Blizzard needs much harsher punishments for people that ruin matches.
User2:  Anything that was given "competitive" modes, has become worse than multiplayer ever was. It was never this bad in Quake 2, CS, or older games. Specially with strong server admins. This drive to be rated against each other. . . . Remove SR, or make it based points earned in game somehow. Not win/loss. That's the only fix.
User3:  In the old days its because 'competitive' was usually a tournament held at a LAN. Try being a toxic fuckwit when you're sitting 20M away from the dude.
        (amplificatory violence on Youtube)

Utopian valorizations are marginal - and yet present - in all the four types of violence. In this minority, violence works as a prompt for discussing complex themes spanning human nature, empathy, the relation between producer and consumer between text and context (see also the examples above). Therefore, violence does not erase but creates opportunities for exchange, interaction, and even social relations. For instance,

User1:  I've been going through some tough shit for the last 6 months or so. I used to type the same kind of stuff in chat half-jokingly and a lot of people would come back with a lighthearted joke or kind words. Made me feel better.
User2:   Hope things get better for you.
User3:  If you don't have anyone to talk to, feel free to pm me any time.
User4:  I hope everything gets better for you!!
User5:  Hang in there buddy, it won't last forever.
        (amplificatory violence on Reddit)
User1:  The community can't fix this issue. Everyone that agrees that being toxic is shitty isn't toxic. People reading this thread and agreeing are not the issue. A troll that just loves to throw games and insult your mother will not stumble upon this thread and suddenly start being reasonable, that's just not how it works. . . . Currently these people go unpunished.
User2:  Exactly. I am the moderator of a small IRC channel where basically everyone are friends with each other and totally chill and even then, if someone comes in and is intent on being a toxic idiot, it doesn't matter how nice everyone else is about it . . ., eventually they end up banned because they are ruining the atmosphere . . .
User3:  Honestly I think it's the exact opposite: they don't take anything seriously within the game except winning/losing. Every other aspect . . . they don't even see as relevant. There's a disconnect between people and others they're communicating with in an online game. . . . These are things very few people would do outside the confines on online anonymity, and I imagine if they were confronted irl, they would be the polar opposite. I don't know what causes this, but I think it's individuals who have grown up with this level on interconnectedness who are the primary antagonists.

User4:   Honesty time. On very rare occasions, I can get toxic in games. Not to the point of abuse, mostly just arguing with enemies who BM or teammates who start unjustly complaining. . . . It happens when my depression is pretty bad; I turn to video games for something to enjoy and even that is impossible because of some people.

User2:   For a lot of people (not all for sure), it's less that they care so strongly about the game. I think it's more they are investing some of their time into playing the match. Which leads to frustration when it doesn't go well.
(amplificatory violence on Reddit)

Although Reddit and YouTube have different features (the latter is more video-oriented than the former), both show similar dynamics (see Table 1): leading discussions are often triggered by the so-called Play of the Game (a short clip of the best in-game action that follows the end of the match), and netiquette (fairness, appropriate language) is usually followed and respected.

## 5.   Discussion and Conclusions

It can be argued that the study's findings point to an alternative perspective on gaming violence, which emerges as a multi-faceted phenomenon. Considering that online violence is a deferral of the real one, there is evidence that in-game violence entails a variety of functions and meanings, positive as well as negative. The opportunity to compensate, represent, sacrifice, and amplify aggressive emotions in group situations (like the ones experienced with *Overwatch*) works as a bearer of sharing, cohesion, dedication, and expression with a pro-social connotation. Rather than addressing the presence/absence of negative effects, they show that players interpret and experience aggressiveness, sacrifice, and competition in multiple ways. This source of meaning does not avoid violence but harnesses it beyond the simplistic distinction between good and evil. Addressing violence categories, amplificatory violence represents a sort of battleground for users and players (similarly to what happens within the literature and generalist media), supplying opportunities of exchange but also conflict about game violence and related behaviors. Therefore, escapism occurs along with critical, pragmatic, and critical instances aimed to shed light on the issue, providing a heterogeneous array of viewpoints and solutions. Therefore, sacrifice emerged as leading meaningful violence able to move and involve users – such a finding echoes Girard's claims (1979) about its importance in sustaining relationships and the society at large. Compensatory violence (Bettelheim, 1987) comes second, and it is aligned with the transversal importance of the ludic connotation across data collected – an orientation that frames aggressivity as an entertaining mirror without consequences in real life. The last typology is representative violence (Turner, 1982), which by the way, points to specific game rituals and a relatively high incidence of utopian stances.

Although violence can entail media toxicity and anti-social behaviors (and vice versa), online gaming and its audiences deal with it through a variety of different approaches. Therefore, it is possible to find examples of meaningful violence in digital entertainment (answering Research Question 1). Addressing Research Question 2, Youtube and Reddit may work as supportive environments in this direction, and their dynamics highlight the importance of game elements that are often overlooked by the literature (e.g., Markey, Markey & French, 2015; Prescott, Sargent, & Hull 2018) but may facilitate this positive attitude. For instance, *Overwatch* includes several lore components that frame violence in an aware and non-frivolous way. Some characters, like Reinhardt, have a specific background where sacrifice and immolation are explained and highlighted. Game mechanics play a crucial role as well, with abilities and countermoves promoting altruism (for instance, grabbing an enemy bomb and bring it away from teammates) that become triggers of a different take on violence and conflict. Therefore, designers, as well as scholars, should consider how video games address violence as a whole, going beyond the mere presence of explicit content and hostile behavior, which are just a component of the meaning of violence in online settings.

Implications can be noteworthy for both practitioners (e.g., educators, social media managers) and researchers indeed. The former group can harness these insights for contextualizing in-game violence and extrapolating positive attitudes to share and discuss; online games and eSports are widespread among new generations, and such an exposure is going to increase rather than diminish. Supporting and moderating proactive discussions about in-game violence (like some observed instances related to amplificatory violence) may overturn disruptive trends among players, who tend to learn toxic attitudes from other users in their reference community (Murnion et al., 2018). The latter group can expand and problematize our perspective further by deepening further video games, social media, and audiences. Moreover, alternative instruments of inquiry can be adopted, from quantitative surveys to semi-structured interviews for acquiring a more comprehensive take on the topic and its articulation. Such a wide analytical scope is indeed particularly needed now. The recent inclusion of the internet gaming disorder in the list of mental diseases by the World Health Organization is an example of how the debate is still ongoing and controversial (Przybylski, Weinstein, & Murayama, 2017), even if empirical evidence (e.g., Markey & Ferguson, 2017; Prescott, Sargent, & Hull, 2018) shows us that the majority of players are neither addicted nor negatively influenced by video games.

Regardless, the present study has four main vulnerabilities. First, it targets one specific product and two social media. Although this selection was justified by popularity and pertinence, conclusions are partially relative. They need to be compared with other titles (and related game mechanics and rules) and online settings, which may differ in terms of audiences, attitudes, and habits. Second, the analysis was driven by a framework designed by the authors themselves, which may point to subjective influences; however, the four categories adopted and the related research design draw their cornerstones from well-established literature spanning psychology, media studies, and philosophy. Third, the investigation is exploratory at its core, and more specific questions (and then hypotheses to test) need to be asked and answered with further instruments and frameworks. Fourth, its implications are partially subject to change due to the evolving media scenario; new online content and discussions are posted every day on Reddit and YouTube. As such, an iterative observation should be considered for gathering patterns and trends related to the topic. Despite these limitations, which are actually insights for future studies that can problematize our findings, it can be argued that the results collected justify and call for more attention toward meaningful ways to discuss and experience in-game violence. To our knowledge, this is the first empirical attempt to frame in-game violence as a potentially meaningful concept beyond *good and evil*. The objective of this article is indeed to provide the first step in this direction, understanding media violence from an alternative and less polarized perspective.

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