Destroying The World To Save It

The roles of violence in gaming

Keith Hackwood

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In roleplaying games we find a great deal of violence, in fact it could be argued that violence is essential to the genre (in a way not dissimilar to the Tarantino position that states 'violence is one of the most fun things to watch'). Whether it be interstellar phasar blasts at an alien horde (fighting the Good Fight), streamers of magical lightning at the head of a hatchling dragon (protecting one's investment), or the stiletto-and-garotte show of stealthy foe-assassination (predator drone porn, anyone?), obvious violence is everywhere, and conflict is in-built into the very game mechanics. We have critical hit tables, damage bonuses, attack rolls, armour class, battle fatigue, psionic depletion, magical weaponry and combat tables aplenty. Indeed, it is hard not to read roleplay systems and their attendant rule sets as riddled with the euphemisms of a real-world military *realpolitik* – one with which we are all-too-familiar in our conflicted, tooled-up, media-saturated age. Its noteworthy that the games we play partially evolved out of military miniatures, strategy games and tactical play – TSR that sunken flagship, gave the game away in its own name 'Tactical Studies Rules'. Of course it is worthy of mention that one committed source of gamers has always been the armed services, within whose current and ex- ranks reside many talented game-devotees.

However, these self-evident systemic inclusions of violence aside, I'm hoping to go a little deeper here. Few would argue that the Tarantino position lacks a point – after all violence *is* fun in the roleplaying sense, and the sublimation of supposedly shadowy or bestial drives into imaginal conflict in high fantasy or deep space, the old West or Future-geddon is part of the allure, and the grist or crunch of the form. Anyone who ever watched a cartoon or laughed at a pratfall knows this.

The apparently alternate pole to the Tarantino position can be summarised as the Polanski view – that the depiction of violence needs 'to upset people' or else risk becoming 'obscenity'. In other words, not only the image of violence but its effects, its impact, its context also need attention, lest we become inured to it and find ourselves desensitized, over-conditioned automatic thug-voyeurs. This is a position familiar to critics of violent film and video games, and casts realist aspersions on imaginal projects, looking for causal relationships between game experience and 'real-life' events (think of the 1980s moral majority backlash against D&D, the outrage at the lyrics on gangsta hip-hop albums or the moral

panic engendered by the latest Grand Theft Auto). Of course, one retort to the hardening of this view is to point out that a) this is roleplaying, i.e. none of it is really happening, that b) the violence occurring here is being doled out by an elf (or a wizard, or a retro-shootist, or a fifteen foot tall mutant cyborg from the fifteenth aeon) upon a stinking great troll (or a were-beast, an animated toxic goat-skeleton or a cube of sentient protoplasm from the Venklaria System) and c) its all intended as fun, you know entertainment, perhaps even satire. Then again, few would argue that the Polanski view entirely misses the point – after all, violence *is* awful, especially when directed at oneself. The slip on the banana skin or pie in the face always makes us laugh until it is our face, our ass, our sense of self being violated.

Having ironed that little wrinkle out, there is more at stake here that can get lost in amongst the contradictory dualisms of subject and object, repulsion and delight, black and white. After all, you and I have seen hardcore pacifists, wimps, geeks, nerds, sissies and avowed girls suddenly whoop with delight and fire up the battle-lust they never knew they had just at the roll of a few dice. And we have seen fully grown alpha-male hard men cry like babies at the tragic and unexpected loss of a favourite PC or beloved companion – such is the stuff of roleplay, that is its nature, its beauty - it gives and it takes away.

Back to violence and to the subtleties beyond the literal – of course violence is not confined to physical force, but can be applied to any vehement or severe actions of aggression, hostility and violation. Etymologically violence emerges from words like the Old French *violare (*to break, as in an oath) and the Latinate *violation* (injury, irreverence). So we can speak about violent imagery, violent language, violent intentions and violent urges, as well as violent action. We can note how violence can be systematised (check any rule systems and the constant need among gamers to ignore or rework them, especially when we are violently opposed to certain aspects therein, or feel that in their neat state they 'do violence upon us' or the game we happen to be attached to). Violence is often equated with mindlessness, though it is also perpetuated in formal systems or thought-tools – so the difference between randomly bludgeoning a captive orc in the face because he cheeked me, or playing it strictly by the alignment rules for a chaotic evil character, have some interesting ways of intersecting.

There are some other threads to examine too, in no particular order; the idea that violence '*is the last refuge of the incompetent'* (Asimov), that '*violent delights have violent ends*' (Shakespeare), that violent action is necessarily informed by '*claims to virtue'* (Robert Jay Lifton) or that s/he '*who overcomes by force hath overcome but half the foe*' (Milton). My own personal favourite of these soundbites comes from Nietzsche, who maybe had roleplayers in mind when he pointed out that '*he who fights with monsters should be careful lest he become a monster'* in Beyond Good & Evil. So what to do with all this? Can we clarify useful violence

from 'bad' violence (i.e. that which creates a simplification of complexity by means of a 'cutting through' from that which ends up as 'violence *masquerading as love*' to quote R.D. Laing)? What about power relations, for is it not so that the state requires a monopoly on violence, or that violence haunts all liberal thought?

I offer no answers to these chewy and paradoxical nuggets, though I do want to suggest that things are rarely as clear or simple as they appear. There is such a thing as myth, and within that sphere there are types of myth that prevail upon violent modalities, insisting upon themselves in 'monomythic' ways or else sickening all they contact through the method of the 'pathomyth'. It has been observed that the cultural entity most often referred to as America has such a pathomyth operative within it – the *myth of redemption through violence* – the observably insane conclusion of which is reflected in the title of this essay - the need to destroy the world in order to save it (of course, most imperial structures carry the same imprint, its just that America happens to be the 'Hegemon with Hollywood', and therefore the most visible expression of the trope).

As Walter Wink puts it (in his essay 'the Myth of Redemptive Violence')

"The Myth of Redemptive Violence is the story of the victory of order over chaos by means of violence. It is the ideology of conquest, the original religion of the status quo"

Sounds familiar enough, and it should be, it's a story as old as the Babylonian creation myth (the Enuma Elish featuring Marduk, Tiamat, Apsu et al), that gets reworked in as diversified a form as Popeye and the 'War on Terror', in Westerns or sport or sci-fi, in fantasy and in advertising.

A lot rides on the way in which the world is viewed – is it 'nasty, brutish and short' coloured by the ends justifying the means, fixated upon a clash of chaos and order, civilization and barbarism? Or is there a dimension of something over-arching, a paladin-like devotional aspect channelled into holy war or jihad? Does one's own relationship to violence challenge or perpetuate, support or obstruct the literalising of violence in the outer world? Or the inner world for that matter. What price non-violence?

It is true to note that gamers are among those of the citizenry least prone to actual violence, to 'acting out' the urge to dominate. No accident, since as any decent gamer is very aware, in roleplaying there is no 'winner', in fact, there is a strong aspect of mutuality (the need for others in order to play at all, and certainly to play well). So there's an absence of motivation towards personal victory and a recognition of the mutual flow of otherness, alongside which there is also often an explicit 'playing with the forms'. Many RPGs use good/evil or law/chaos matrices of alignment or character motivation as part of their structural

vessel – to play with these *ur*-forces explicitly appears to loosen the need to literalise them, frees them up in a spacious fashion and mitigates against the emotional pathogen of sentimentality that is fundamentalism. Slaying trolls might well keep us from slaying one another, then. But it isn't that gamers are exempt from literalising (check any RPG themed forum or messageboard on any given day and notice how edition wars and holier-than-thou system evangelism, disparagement of other systems and tribal affiliation is generally rampant), simply that the manner in which they tend to literalise is already doused in fantasy, already sourced in a ritual of intra-psychic action that lends itself to play, not fratricide.

If the myth of redemptive violence is in some way an expression of psychological needs, the mechanics of which involve splitting off the 'bad' and identifying with the 'good' (villain v hero, chaos v law, evil v good etc), then roleplaying is a pretty skilful way of engaging with the phenomena, following the trajectories of quest and adventure through the transitional states of adversarial and mutual violence, engaging with desire (which according to Hegel creates a dialectic of 'desire desiring the desire of the other'; and according to Girard brings us to 'desire imitating the desire of the other'). However, the big danger is, as ever, that the form becomes an opiate, a defence against experience, an escape – here's Wink again:

"The basic structure of the combat myth underlies the pap to which many adults turn in order to escape the harsher realities of their everyday lives: spy thrillers, cop shows, westerns… It is as if we must watch so much 'redemptive' violence to reassure ourselves, against the deluge of facts to the contrary, that reality really is that simple"

Now, we may argue with the tone but the point stands – if we abdicate our gaming insights into the nature and manifestation of violence, if we learn nothing through our play but only seek to escape or elude 'harsh reality', then we are at best stunted human beings, and at worst, facilitators of actual literal violence in the actual literal world.

As Lama Yeshe put it *"First we create a situation; then we're scared of it"*, it is from that place that fear becomes the driver and violence the likely end. So, my fellow gaming friends, if there is a moral to this tale it is one of nuance, maturation, complexity, and dare I say, initiation. The relationship of roleplaying games to violence turns out to be a subtle one and the simplicities of a story born from 'redemption through violence' soon fade if we follow those wiser and ultimately more satisfying threads. May all your myths be multiversed, all your worlds born whole, and all your violence imaginal.

I leave you with the poets, see that they don't hurt you with their song:

The slain in battle fell to Earth.
Steadfast and unyielding, Byrhtnoth exhorted them,
bidding that each young warrior's purpose to this battle,
against the Danes a desire to win glory in war.
Advanced again to fierce battle, weapons raised up,
shields to defense, and towards these warriors they stepped.
Resolute they approached Earl to the lowest Yeoman:
each of them intent on harm for the enemy.

Enraged became that warrior: with anger he stabbed
that proud Viking who had given him that wound.
Experienced was that warrior; he thrust his spear forward
through the warrior's neck, his hand guiding
so that he this ravager's life would fatally pierce.
Then he with another stab speedily pierced the ravager
so that the chainmail coat broke: this man had a breast wound
cut through the linked rings; through his heart stuck
a deadly spear. The Earl was the better pleased:
laughed then this great man of spirit, thanking the Creator for
the day's work which the Lord had given him.

(from the Douglas Killings translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem 'The Battle of Maldon' circa 991 C.E.)

Height of sword-strife, do you see this?
My heart is burning like a firebrand.
I praised their men's and their women's riches:
They could not deny me;
Brothers fed me, better it was when they lived
Sturdy Arthur's cubs, steadfast stronghold.
At Caer Lwytgoed they were not sated:
There were blood-stained crows, fresh plundering sons
They pierced shield with spike Cyndrwynyn's
I shall mourn till I enter earth's bed
Cynddylan slain, lord of high renown.

(from the Joseph Clancy translation of an anonymous Welsh elegy for Cynddylan, circa 875 C.E.)

And finally, in W C Green's translation, from the poem 'Head Ransom' which is found in Egil's Saga:

'Axe furnished feast
For Ogress' beast:
Eric on the wave
To wolves flesh-banquet gave.

'Javelins flying sped,
Peace affrighted fled;
Bows were bent amain,
Wolves were battle-fain:
Spears in shivers split,
Sword-teeth keenly bit;
Archers' strings loud sang,
Arrows forward sprang.

'He back his buckler flings
From arm beset with rings,
Sword-play-stirrer good,
Spiller of foemen's blood.
Waxing everywhere
(Witness true I bear),
East o'er billows came
Eric's sounding name