The Rules of the Game

by [Justin Yoon](#)

"Finish him," a deep voice booms, and Mileena lunges at her opponent with razor-sharp fingers as she pulls his neck close to the crooked, skinless jaw of her mutated visage. Her gaze sharpens into feral focus as she caresses her victim's cheek with a long, spindly tongue, silently drinking in his fear and pain. With a faint metallic whisper, her iron-tipped claws spring out, cleaving through skin and bone as she carves a gaping hole in her adversary's stomach. A symphony of blood, skin, and bits; the wet sound of intestines slipping and slithering from their places. Fingers splayed, Mileena draws her bloodied hand back, then rams it up her victim's ribcage, pushing upwards past the fleshy tunnel of their throat and into his mouth. With a blood-curdling shriek, her fingers punch through her adversary's forehead from the inside, and the crunching of bones echoes as she crumples their face like a used napkin. With a swift, brutal tug, she wrests the gruesome trophy free, and the screen hones in on the mutilated mass of flesh clutched in her bloody talons. "Mileena wins," the deep voice declares. A single, ominous word looms in the foreground, painted a deep, bloody red: FATALITY.

The battle had been too much for me—the blood, the gore, and the unequivocally remorseless eyes of Mileena as she butchered my opponent on-screen. I knew that I wanted nothing more to do with what I'd just seen, so I shut down the game and haven't touched *Mortal Kombat 11* again. It was a bit of a shame, really, as everything except for the gut-wrenching violence had been rather exciting. The controls were responsive, the combos were satisfying, and, most importantly, the characters felt unique and real. But despite the tantalizing gameplay, I couldn't bring myself to engage with it again. I hadn't booted up *Mortal Kombat 11* expecting to be so thoroughly

disturbed; death and violence aren't exactly unfamiliar to most gamers, myself included. Many of my peers throw around phrases like "kill him!"or "fuck him up" with a casual indifference. Despite our brutal idioms, none of us actively seek out violent media or relish the idea of spilling blood. We only speak in such a way because violence and destruction are inseparable from our favorite games.

League of Legends is another popular game that calls for brutality and ruination. Throughout the course of a match, players have to kill enemies to earn gold to buy better items and level up faster. You must destroy enemy defense structures to gain a tactical advantage and join forces against stronger rivals to collect gold bounties for killing them. Violence is a necessary evil, but ultimately, the focus of *League of Legends* is strategy and teamwork. Skillful killing isn't the key to improving as a player—the calm, controlled nature of professional *League of Legends* matches illustrate that fact. 'Pro' games aren't won by bloodbaths; they're won through superior strategy, coordination with other players, and mastery of different characters. There are numerous games designed in a similar manner, using violence as a catalyst of sorts to keep the game moving forward. While its uses can vary—from circulating the in-game economy, to awarding points, or advancing a narrative, the fact remains that violence is seldom the central theme.

Mortal Kombat, however, left a bloody trail of unfiltered gore and violence in its wake. Prior to its release on the Super Nintendo console in 1993, there had never been anything remotely like it in the gaming industry (Crossley). Few games had been that raw, ruthless, and utterly vicious. In *Mortal Kombat*, two players pit their avatars against one another in dirty, unregulated, hand-to-hand combat, with the goal of beating their adversary into a bloody, lifeless pulp by any means necessary. However, it wasn't so much the gameplay of *Mortal Kombat* that shocked the masses as it was its climactic "fatalities": the penultimate stage of the game in which players have the chance to strike a lethal blow onto their opponent (Crossley). The aforementioned episode of Mileena's

violence is just one example of fifty fatalities in *Mortal Kombat 11*, one of the most recent iterations of the long-running franchise (Webb). Each playable character is capable of performing up to two unique, gut-wrenching fatalities, and each fatality seems more barbaric than the last. To make matters worse, there have been a total of eighteen individual *Mortal Kombat* titles released to date, and together they form a collection of hundreds of nightmarish scenes. Naturally, it didn't take long for legal action to be taken against *Mortal Kombat*: the game was soon banned in countries such as Australia, Brazil, and South Korea. Despite this, the *Mortal Kombat* player-base remains, with elite competitors duking it out over prize pools of up to $100,000. It has sold millions of copies, and continues to attract hundreds of thousands of spectators to tournaments. Its fanbase is tight-knit, extremely passionate, and easily one of the most hardcore and dedicated. But what is it about *Mortal Kombat* that makes it so successful, despite its controversial nature? How could such a graphic game spawn a near cult-like following?

Video games are often perceived as an inconsequential hobby, if not an outright waste of time. Arguing against that notion is British philosopher Mary Midgley, who in her 1974 essay "The Game Game" postulated that all games are deeply linked to the lives of their players: "games are continuous with the life around them, and their selection is not at all optional or arbitrary" (237). She asserts that people are naturally drawn to certain games by the unique preferences they develop throughout their lives. To further illustrate her point, Midgley draws upon the example of a passionate tennis player who would never substitute tennis with football because tennis "is not a team game; it involves no physical contact and does not make the players dirty. Moreover there are rackets, which, if used in the spirit of football, might kill people" (237). While I can't explore Midgley's argument from the perspective of a *Mortal Kombat* fan, I can still view it through the lens of a video game fanatic. Like the tennis player she discusses, I'm well aware of the preferences I have that make *League of Legends* an irreplaceable game for me. To me, for instance, the act of drawing feels so similar to that of playing *League of*

Legends, even though they don't even remotely resemble one another. When I think about drawing, I recall days after days of practicing, but there was also the occasional excitement that gripped me as my fledgling sketches bloomed across unmarked paper—the visual confirmation of mechanical improvement. I fell in love with the gradual process of improving mechanically, and *League of Legends* is a behemoth that I've been grinding away at for almost five years now.

How exactly does drawing connect to gaming? When drawing, there are a number of mechanics used in harmony with the artist's medium. Despite the seemingly monotonous back-and-forth motion of an artist's pen, there's thought and deliberation in each and every line. There's the mechanic of superimposition: the act of layering lines to form illusions. There's also shading: the act of carefully spacing linework density to create light and shadow. I could also mention pressure: the act of learning to kill or bring to life every line you draw. Similarly, with video games the 'controller' is a medium for my artwork, as it allows me to directly influence my designs the way an artist controls their illustrations with a pen.

Learning to game is not so different from learning to draw, for one must first master the controller before going any further. Echoing that notion is Professor Graeme Kirkpatrick, who in his 2011 book *Aesthetic Theory and The Video Game* writes that "learning [the] generic properties of the controller is essential to becoming good at video games" (105*)*. In fact, neither a pen nor a keyboard requires skill and practice for everyday use, but once they become controllers, some artistry or expertise is required. For example, I would adopt a gentle grip close to a pen's base in order to chisel out small, specific details, while a tighter grip on its center is what I'd shift to in order to produce a more neutral and flexible style of linework. Contrast that with the act of playing *League of Legends*, where the keyboard also demands mastery of very specific finger positionings—some simple and others complex—so that I can quickly and accurately navigate the game's challenges and landscapes without so much as a cursory

glance away from the screen. Further, according to Kirkpatrick, after we learn the basics of a new medium, we delve into "kinemes"—a piece of dance terminology that describes the culmination of a series of movements into a meaningful whole—as we develop a greater capacity to make art or perform with skill. In *League of Legends*, for example, I have very specific keys —and thus physical motions—that I would press in order to kill an enemy as Yasuo: one of my favourite characters. The most basic kineme would be to press: Q, right-click, R, Q, rich-click. However, if I needed to output as much damage as possible, the kineme would change into: Q, right-click, E, Q, R, F, Q, right-click. Now, if the target were further away, I would have to press D right after my first Q. And while that may be a lot to take in, the countless scenarios that can arise within a *League of Legends* match require that I be skilled enough to adapt my kinemes to best suit the situation.

This phenomenon is also mirrored in the action of creating value in a drawing. Adding value usually means creating shadows, but the process through which value is layered changes drastically depending on the situation. Take, for comparison's sake, the visual differences between steel and cloth. While the former is characterised by sharp, clear breaks in shadows to capture value, the latter tends to possess smoother gradients that sell the illusion of soft curvature. To draw steel with a pen, one would ideally be going through the kineme of moving the pen in sharp, accurate lines with their wrists. With cloth, however, the kineme would usually entail curving movements that begin from the elbow. While you needn't press specific keys when drawing, both drawing and gaming require individuals to be familiar with and skilled at performing kinemes in order to make a smooth and cohesive experience.

Exploring how my interest in drawing influences my video game preferences only brings me halfway to understanding the mind of an avid *Mortal Kombat* player, however. Fans come back again and again for the intense experience unique to *Mortal Kombat*, and their online discussions help make sense of the game's appeal despite its

over-the-top violence. On *Mortal Kombat*'s Reddit page, r/MortalKombat, on a thread entitled "Story or game play? Why do you love Mortal Kombat?" one user posted that "Before I got into it I was fascinated by the aesthetic, mostly. How it managed to be so unrelentingly grim, nasty, and lowbrow. Like something a dumb, angry teenager would draw on his math homework. I like that." Delt, the creator of the thread, responded that "It is so far-fetched that MK provides an odd sense of entertainment. It is just over the top in every way. Which may be the best part about it, it is an escape from the real world – we all could use that at times" (@-Delt-). In addition to the expertise required to become skilled at the game, then, the *Mortal Kombat* community also seems drawn to the specific set of emotions and experiences that the game evokes, not necessarily the act of seeing their characters commit atrocities.

Building on this appeal of escaping from 'the real,' Danish professor Jesper Juul argues in his book *Half-Real* that games serve as "playgrounds where players can experiment with doing things they would or would not normally do" (193). He exemplifies this through the racing game *Burnout 2*, wherein a specific setting called "crash mode" encourages players to drive into busy roads in order to cause cataclysmic traffic accidents (193). However, Juul is quick to interject that "It would be a misunderstanding to see a game as an expression of the players wanting to perform the in-game actions in reality" (193). According to him, "crash mode" intrigues us not because we actually *want* to drive into busy freeways, but rather because "we want to consider the possibility of death and destruction" (193). Heeding his argument, one can deduce that a *Mortal Kombat* player's fixation with the game isn't a reflection of ill intent or a sadistic urge, but rather evidence of their curiosity regarding death and violence. Within the world of *Mortal Kombat,* players can explore and contemplate these experiences in a safe manner just as we would any intense idea, moral problem, or emotion through art.

This appeal is only amplified by the fact that *Mortal Kombat* is a great deal more successful in making accessible and bringing to life intense violence than most other video games. Nowadays, violent games have become synonymous with the shooter genre—the recent craze that keeps millions of eyes glued to a screen. What's interesting, however, is the fact that these supposedly 'violent' shooters are often designed in a manner that partially neutralizes their inherently violent nature. Take, for example, the maniacal, trigger-happy gameplay of Gearbox Software's *Borderlands 2*. Players step into the shoes of intrepid mercenaries, exploring the unruly lands of Pandora while collecting a plethora of quirky guns, grenades, and rocket launchers. All forms of conflict are solved with brutal efficiency: if anything gets in your way, point your gun towards it and empty the mag. If that gets too boring, the game offers multiple ways to kill your enemies: club them to death with your gun, commit mass murder with explosive barrels, or simply run over them with the vehicle of your choice. Naturally, this means that players must kill hundreds of enemies in order to play through the entire game. And yet, they don't feel the weight of committing these massacres. In fact, they don't feel the weight of taking a single life, as the enemies come in endless, faceless mobs. Players get caught up in the materialistic flow of the game, casually killing enemies for the purpose of looting, as though they are poking at a vending machine. The mindless anonymity of the kills pushes players to lose sight of just how grim and violent the game actually is.

Mortal Kombat, however, offers a clear and unfiltered vision of violence through its strict, gladiatorial form of settling conflict. The game is purely player versus player, and denies all players the convenience of pulling a trigger to kill someone from a distance. Kills are made with bare hands, and that makes it personal. The game is far from the one-sided massacre that gamers have become accustomed to, as the enemy has a name and an identity. In order to kill in *Mortal Kombat*, one must take time to get to know their opponent: studying, analyzing, and predicting their playstyle. It's a lethal duet of jabbing and punching and kicking, and both sides struggle to ensure it won't be their

face that is ripped off in the end. Every blow you land edges your opponent closer to death, but every hit you suffer in return is a chilling reminder of your own mortality. The *Mortal Kombat* experience is formed by these thematic elements, and it allows players to experience a fierce, desperate sense of competition that would otherwise be impossible to find. It captures the adrenaline rush of fighting for your life, and the catharsis of emerging triumphant from mortal struggle.

Games are far more important than people let on, then. They aren't just pixels and rapid button mashing, but rather an emerging form of contemporary media through which people can form intimate connections. Beyond that, they are just as capable of embodying and representing controversial ideas as any other artform. Just like art, games demand a certain degree of literacy from their players in order to be fully understood. Learning their languages takes consistent mechanical practice, and becoming fluent in game navigation takes time and effort. And while I'm still unable to come to terms with what *Mortal Kombat* stands for, it is nonetheless an important torch-bearer in the evolution of video-games. Games do matter, and it's time for people to catch on.

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