H.N.D. GAMES PRODUCTION

Unit 4: Special Subject Investigation for Creative Media Production

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Video Games Design as an Art Form: Choices and Their Consequences

Introduction

VIDEO games are a popular entertainment product, enjoyed by a large number of people worldwide on a regular basis. With this level of interest comes a large amount of discussion on the place of video games in modern culture as well as their meaning to people now and perhaps in the future. A contemporary topic of conversation in video games media is whether video games can be considered an art form. These arguments often focus on the content found in video games, such as; well-written stories, beautifully crafted artwork and emotionally relatable characters. While people often call film or music art products without thought, the idea of video games as an art form does not seem to share the same acceptance. This may become more important to societies since the overall market revenue for video games is growing (Brian Blau, 2013), therefore, this is potentially an important topic of discussion for one of the newest forms of entertainment media.

While I understand the reasoning for arguing the artistic merit of the content in games, I believe the root of the argument for championing video games as an art form should lie deeper in the products development history. By this I mean the higher level design choices made mainly at the pre-production stage of the development cycle, e.g. will the player's progress be achieved by the enactment of violence; is the aim to make as much money from this product by making the gameplay addictive? This belief comes from a personal aspiration to positively contribute to the industry in as a creative director of video games. Therefore, I feel it is important for me personally and the people in the industry who argue for video games as an art form to explore the relationship between the ways in which video games are designed and the effect this can have on consumers and developers, in regards to their behaviour, personality and health. By approaching the subject in this manner I hope to reveal new points of consideration for future debates on the topic of video games as an art form, though limitations of this line of enquiry may require me to look at the larger social and/or historical context of art, design and/or entertainment.

Violence in Video Games

Evidence was sought out that would explain why violence is so common in video games and surveys were prepared to gauge the impact and importance of this topic among the general public.

Why is violence so common in video games?

Initially, there appears to be a lack of sources which examine or explain why violence is such a common theme/mechanic in video games. Answers could be found by looking outside of video games media and research, so some books in the library were consulted which covered topics in social psychology.

There are differing views which can explain, for example; how *"survival of the fittest"* breeds aggressive impulses into humans, or; that *"human nature"* has a wide variety of psychological mechanisms and motives which have contributed to these behaviours (Smith & Mackie, 2000). Frustration-aggression theory postulates that frustration is a stimulus that brings about aggression. It also goes on to describe how displacement of that aggression can occur in the form of *target substitution*; where aggression is inhibited against a frustrating agent and instead enacted against some third party (Vaughan & Hogg, 1995), i.e. a person may take out frustration with their boss in the form of aggression against others. Perhaps a virtual substitute in the form of a video game avatar could take the role of the other, in this sense. Vaughan & Hogg also explained *Bandura's view of the role of vicarious experience in learning aggressive behaviour* (pp. 372-374). The authors describe a series of experiments conducted by Bandura et al (1963) that critics could argue proves that even graphic representations of violence can increase imitative aggression in children with possible consequences for children's later behaviour. This gives basis to those who would argue that violence in video games can cause problems for children. Why then, do games designers continue to include violence as a game mechanic in children's video games, if there is a possible risk of passing on aggressive (though not particularly violent or dangerous) behaviours?

An *EDGE Online* article (2013) once gave a possible explanation in regards to why violence is so entertaining and therefore present in many video games. In this article, the author discusses the historic role of violence in our society and the reasoning that a state of death is both simpler for the designer to program and an easier feedback mechanism for the player to understand. The designer tells the game to remove the entity from play and the player should naturally understand the binary, alive-dead state of that entity, letting them know intuitively when an objective is complete.

How that is affecting consumers; specifically, those predisposed to violent behaviour

Looking at modern research it is possible to see that a variety of studies have been performed by various organisations and individuals, with merited arguments on both sides of the debate as to whether violent video games contribute to violence, typically in youth. Online nonpartisan, non-profit ProCon.org (2014) summarises that critics of violent video games argue that playing violent games desensitizes players to real-life violence and are

responsible for teaching children that violence is an acceptable approach to solving conflicts and achieving goals. Meanwhile, defenders of violent video games argue that the research has failed to show a causal link between video games and real-world violence and that correlation between video games and violent behaviour can be explained by youth predisposed to violence being attracted to violent entertainment. So then, how are these arguments represented in the mass media?

Contemporary news media often seem to publish negative articles with headlines such as *'Violent video games leave teens 'morally immature''* (Coughlan, 2014)*, while also cautiously including more conservative studies with headlines like *'Video games are good for children (sort of)'* (Bingham, 2015). So how does the public feel about this issue?

Gauging the opinions of the general public

Two research surveys were given to the public; one a quantitative measure consisting of closed questions; the other a qualitative measure consisting of open questions. Charts created from the first survey shown below;
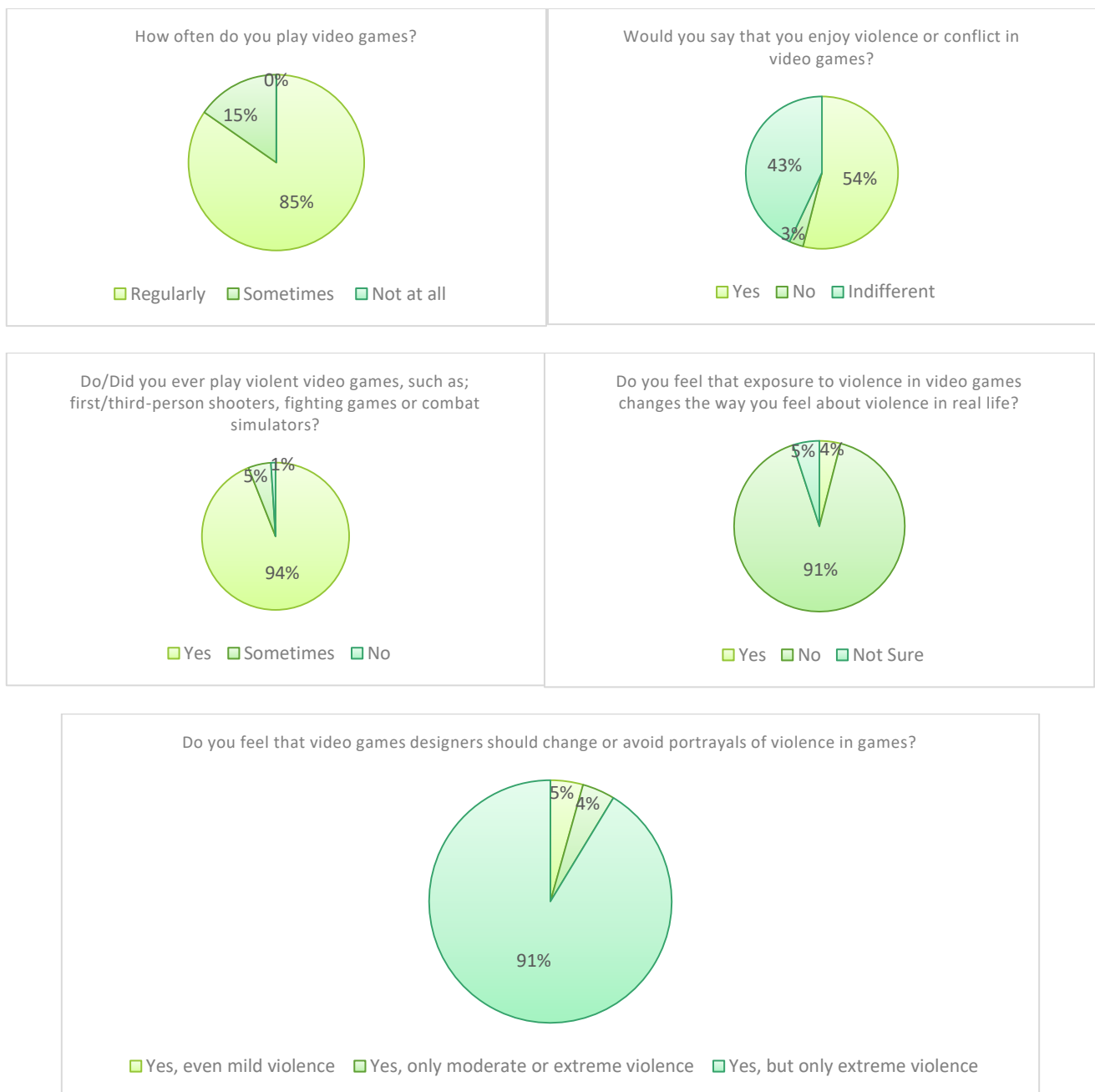

Table 1 - Results from the primary research survey on the public's perception of violence in video games.

Among those who participated in the second survey many accepted all forms of violence in video games, while some required there to be a context for the violence and the rest gave examples of acts which they consider to be extreme violence – rape, random acts of violence & child abuse – which they found unacceptable in games. Titles cited with these acts included *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games, 1997-2015), *Mortal Kombat* (NetherRealm Studios, 1992-2015), *Hatred* (Destructive Creations, 2015) and *Prototype* (Radical Entertainment, 2009). When asked specifically which acts they consider should not be portrayed in video games a lot of people said none, while most mentioned rape, less mentioned torture and no-one at all considered murder to be taboo. There were also singular mentions among the responses that mentioned child abuse, the murder of children (specifically), domestic violence, war crimes, genocide and mutilation.

> *"[Video games are] not as distressing as film or literature. Film has more options in regard to atmosphere and special effects. Literature is limited by the readers' imagination." – **Anon (2015)***

Participants were asked if they also find those levels of violence or violent acts as distressing when encountered in other forms of media and were encouraged to express their views on any difference in their opinions between the mediums. An almost equal amount found violence in other mediums more or less distressing. Those more distressed by film explaining that films can be more violent or realistic in their portrayals of violent acts, as well as a perception of video games as more removed from reality than film. Reasons given by those more disturbed by video game violence explained that the disturbing thing is that children, with a developing sense of right and wrong, often play games with violent content. One participant responded that playing a rapist in a scene would be *"grossly inappropriate"*, while another wondered how it would make them feel if they had to do that in a game.

Only around of fifth of participants felt that the games designers/creators were responsible for the inclusion of violent content while the remaining opinions placed responsibility with consumer demand and slightly less pointed towards both parties as partially responsible. This seems to fall in line with answers to the final question, which asked if the person felt that developers are creating any problems for society, with most answering no and only a fraction of them answering positively or undecidedly in various ways. Those who felt there were issues stemming from thematic choices mentioned sexism and the possibility of messaging issues for those members of society who are pre-disposed to violence.

Addiction to Video Games

With violence in games being such a debated topic it may be of interest to find out *why* we play video games and why some people become seemingly addicted to playing video games. While it is understood that video game addiction is not recognised as a disorder in most medical guidance for the majority of countries, it can be evident if you spend any length of time in a community of gamers, that you will notice people sometimes play even one video game for the majority of their day, over long periods of time. An informal online discussion was started in order to collect answers to three questions from willing participants (Jarrastafari, 2014);

- *Why you play games?*
- *Do you get addicted to certain games?*
- *If so, do you know why (what hooks you)?*

Gamers opinions

Almost all of the responses mentioned or suggested that the person saw their reason for gaming as a form of escapism, with several noting the desire to do things not physically possible in real life. An almost even amount of people mentioned a combination of; improving skills and overcoming challenges; mental stimulation and high

adrenaline; admiring artistry, beautiful fantasies and virtual sight-seeing; social interactions and a sense of reward. Half of the respondents said they were addicted to games, explaining that they felt a need to be competitive against other online players in order to feel a sense of achievement and that the activity itself was easy to access and more thrilling, suspenseful and engaging than other mediums like television. The remaining responders were split evenly, with some stating that they had no addiction and the others recognise that they were at an earlier point in their lives – what they consider *addicted* – but are no longer due to their adult responsibilities. Most interestingly none of the participants mentioned any form of violence as the reason they play.

This begs the question as to whether perhaps it is just the availability of free time and preference for the medium of video games that makes it appear that people are addicted to certain games.

"If the game is fun, interesting, thought-provoking or innovative, an audience is likely to get hooked on the content and identify positively with the brand or message." - (Salmond & Ambrose, 2013)

Salmond & Ambrose (2013) describe it eloquently and *'addiction'*, as a word, may simply be a convenient metaphor for the phenomenon players around the world are experiencing. But is it any different from other, more historically recognised addictions?

Dictionary.com (2015) describes addiction – based on the *Random House Dictionary* - as;

> **Noun** – *the state of being enslaved to a habit or practice or to something that is psychologically or physically habit-forming, as narcotics, to such an extent that its cessation causes severe trauma.*

- or - as based on the *Collins English Dictionary*;

> **Noun** – *the condition of being abnormally dependent on some habit, especially compulsive dependency on narcotic drugs*

Under these definitions, it could be argued that the activity of gaming has become a habit by which people become addicted to the medium. However, does that make it as influential as medically identified sources of addiction, such as drugs? In *The evolutionary origins and significance of drug addiction, Saah posits:*

"The nature of drug addiction is three-fold: biological, psychological, and social. Although humans may be biologically and psychologically predisposed to drug use and addiction, they may often be driven towards that state by social and cultural influences. To what extent environmental stimuli affect a person's vulnerability to addiction is unknown and may be varying. However, we cannot ignore the great impact of environmental and mental stimuli in the progression towards addiction." - (Saah, 2005)

The effects of gaming on the player

While it may seem impractical to compare the severity of video game and drug addiction, it was felt to be important that we understand similarities between the two's biological effect on the human brain, in order to hope to answer whether or not society should be taking the possibility of bona fide video games addiction seriously.

The Game Theorists (2014) examine how addictive games are designed by use of variable ratio scale reinforcement, of which gambling is a good example (Cherry, 2015). Their argument goes on to suggest that the dopamine (a

neurotransmitter which helps control reward-motivated behaviour) released in the brain during gaming, can be compared to that released by physical addictions such as drugs and junk food (sugary and high-fat). This could be an interesting comparison to note because while societies have for a long time in history, recognised and addressed in some ways the existence of drug addiction, we have only recently taken more notice and action on studies examining the adaptations in brain reward circuitry caused by high-fat and high-sugar foods. One such study conducted by Sharma et al (2013) concluded that the heightened motivation during withdrawal or intermittent access to these types of foods may contribute to an addiction-like process in which repeated cycles of access, deprivation and resumption promote cravings and dependence. While different societies worldwide will accept and take measures to counteract these issues to varying degrees, it is still notable that both the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* and *World Health Organization* (2015) state that childhood obesity is one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century.

Since children have always been a large consumer of video games since their inception, should we be worried that their psychological development is being negatively affected by games in possibly similar ways their physiological development is being affected by junk foods? It seems an important enough issue that concerns researchers at the University of Bolton. In an article for *Video game addiction 'like being on drugs'* (Fleming, 2008), lead researcher Dr John Charlton suggests that those *'people who were addicted were less emotionally stable or neurotic, and generally more anxious, had lower self-esteem'*.

"Despite a great number of studies focusing on video game addiction, there is still lack of consensus concerning which terms to use, how the phenomenon should be defined, and what methods should be used to measure it." - (Brunborg, et al., 2014)

However, in their full-length report (Brunborg, et al., 2014) conclude that spending time playing video games does not involve negative consequences, but adolescents who experience problems related to video games are likely to also experience problems in other facets of life. They explain that several studies have shown that use of video games is associated with a host of problems, such as; higher levels of depression (Lemona, et al., 2011) (Gentile, et al., 2010), lower academic achievement (Anand, 2007) (Skoric, et al., 2009), alcohol consumption (Ream, et al., 2011) and conduct problems (Holtz & Appel, 2011) (Rehbein, et al., 2010). However, studies have also found that time spent on video games is not related to negative outcomes (e.g. (Rani A. Desai, 2010)), suggesting that the amount of gaming in itself is not necessarily associated with detrimental effects and that there is a greater agreement that experiencing problems related to gaming is related to other negative consequences. Reviewing the literature, (King, et al., 2013) proposed that the core features of video game addiction are withdrawal symptoms experienced when not able to play video games, loss of control over how much time is spent on video games, and conflict in terms of personal relationships and school/work commitments arising from video gaming. In the ongoing debate about how video game addiction should be conceptualized, it has been suggested that high engagement should be distinguished from addiction (e.g. (Charlton & Danforth, 2007)). The possible negative impact of time spent on games may be dependent on individual and contextual factors.

Known consequences; case studies

However, the issues of repetitive play can become so severe that people can neglect their wellbeing so much and it can cost them loss, injury or even death. Many articles and forum posts can be found online to evidence this fact. Accounts of people losing sleep, interest in their social lives, a job or worse. Alienated friends and family observe changes in a person, describing negative states of irritability to the point of *"full-blown rage"* (Lush, 2011). Relatives and neighbours are left *"surprised, shocked"* (Russell, 2013) by murders – intended or accidental – which involve video games and gun crime. Notably, the subjects of these stories span the spectrum of race, class and age; from the very young, adolescent up to adult.

The consequences of excessive video game sessions, therefore, are not limited to just those involved in the activity and that became apparent when mainstream news coverage began reporting a story from South Korea, where a couple was sentenced for neglecting their child in favour of raising a virtual one in an online fantasy game. The incident became the *'first legal case regarding internet addiction in Korea'* (Salmon, 2010) and while there is an argument as to whether or not video games addiction can explain such negligence, the South Korean government responded by restricting video game sessions for under 16's (outlawed 12-6AM) and drafting legislation to group gaming with other anti-social addictions (Strochlic, 2014). A review of the situation in 2013 (Associated Press) saw a division in opinion between the beneficiaries of video games popularity and concerned members of that society, in the run-up to further legislative measures, which would have seen a law that would classify online gaming as potentially antisocial addiction alongside gambling, drugs and alcohol.

While video games addiction may not hold headlines in the way violence in video games can, governments can only do so much in the way of legislation and parents can only do so much in monitoring and restricting excessive play. Should the developer be partly responsible for the product they create, beyond health and safety warnings and their own legal requirements? If they could, should video game designers make decisions during the concept or development of a game that could work towards preventing these social issues in some way?

Exploitative Game Design

In light of these issues, an investigation was carried out into the use of psychological theories in games design, more specifically, those that are used to make games addictive and also to see if a discussion on the ethics of these decisions is taking place.

Exploiting player psychology for profit

"Every time a developer contemplates what a customer might like about a game, they're arguably tackling player psychology." - (Freeman, 2013)

When describing *behavioural game design* Hopson (Hopson, 2001) argues that all games are designed around the player and that while the format of the game or the platform it is delivered on may differ the underlying psychology of how the player learns and reacts to the game should remain constant. It is with this he goes on to describe a series of techniques for engaging the player which are based around behavioural psychology, concluding with his recommendations on how to use these techniques to achieve positive or negative outcomes. While it may be attractive to a games developer to find their target audience playing marathon sessions of their latest game, it could be a dangerous road for the player when weighed against consequences of addictive behaviour.

More dangerously is the fact that these behaviourally designed video games can be delivered using different *payment models*. One such model is *pay-to-play*; where the player can start playing the game free-of-charge or for a fee and they can continue to make payments for game-related content and goods inside the game itself or through an online store. However, the flexibility of the medium allows any game to exploit different types of design or delivery methods. McNeill (2012) identifies that he finds it hard to both respect and hate the behavioural design choice, as its power can be used to create appealing games or empty experiences.

Cook (2013) presents an extensive list of reasons why free-to-play games based on behavioural design hurt the end consumer. He refers to this as *"coercive monetization models"* and states his opinion that no game based on this combination of design choices can provide any form of meaningful enrichment in a player's life. Most interesting is closing he urges fellow designers to *"reject this immoral practice"*. Meanwhile, McNeill (2013) retorts that it is not the payment model alone which corrupts any artistic intent, that any business model can do that. What *is* important,

he argues, is that a healthy exchange of goods or services takes place, with each party preferring to have what the other is offering. He goes onto break down the many possible systems in a games design that could exploit the player, as well as giving advice on how to avoid that as a designer.

While these arguments were mainly sourced from articles from a games design website with a large audience, how many designers currently working in the industry are aware of the information discussed? In order to compare and contrast the opinions in these articles, it seems relevant to include interviews with video game developers on the subject.

Interview with Artist & Game Designer at WiseWonky:

IN LIGHT OF THE POPULARITY OF VIDEO GAMES, THERE HAS BEEN AN INCREASING TREND IN RESEARCHING AND USING PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS WHICH CAN MAKE GAMES MORE APPEALING OR EVEN ADDICTIVE...

• WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON LARGE GAME COMPANIES USING GAMES PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH TO MAKE PEOPLE PLAY FOR LONGER AND/OR PAY FOR IN-GAME PURCHASES?

> *Well, this is something I wasn't fully unaware of, although it doesn't surprise me. After all, to a large company a game is a very much just a product and in such a large business drive their goal is to make money, not art so much. However, I would say that in some cases, creative directors are hired and given some freedom to work with their passion for story and lore, level design, art etc. The team is made up of individuals, each with some varying degrees of freedom to express small parts of themselves. Although money is always the largest driving force of many games. So physiological research may be seen as perhaps manipulation, but then that's marketing, it's all about convincing an audience to buy your game (or in this case in-game item). In an Ideal world I would call this unethical and as an indie, I strive to fill gaps and offer a new experience. I do have to consider marketing, but then I don't have to sell anywhere near the number of games AAA does.*

• DO YOU KNOWINGLY USE ANY KIND OF GAME OR PSYCHOLOGY THEORIES IN YOUR WORK, TO MAKE YOUR GAMES MORE APPEALING OR ADDICTIVE?

> *Not knowingly really, I will try to reward players for doing something tricky in the game i.e. a chest in a hard to reach spot, a more satisfying visual effect for executing a more powerful attack etc. However I'm simply trying to give people a new game-play experience and appeal to a much smaller audience who are looking for this, yes I would like to become successful and make money however it feels often like this will be determined by the people who will play, review and expose my game. However, this is a huge factor for everyone.*

• WOULD YOU CONSIDER USING PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH TO BETTER UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE AND/OR TO MARKET A MORE CRITICALLY/COMMERCIALLY SUCCESSFUL PRODUCT?

> *I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't consider this, however, this game is very personal and with that comes a naive passion to express myself rather than sell a product. I may just leave this kind of implementations to the AAA's and hope the strengths of my game leave lasting impressions and create enjoyment enough for it to be recommended. Of course, it will need a massive amount of exposure to get that chance.*

Interview with Service & Server Programmer at Codemasters:

IN LIGHT OF THE POPULARITY OF VIDEO GAMES, THERE HAS BEEN AN INCREASING TREND IN RESEARCHING AND USING PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS WHICH CAN MAKE GAMES MORE APPEALING OR EVEN ADDICTIVE...

• WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON LARGE GAME COMPANIES USING GAMES PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH TO MAKE PEOPLE PLAY FOR LONGER AND/OR PAY FOR IN-GAME PURCHASES?

I am personally indifferent to this behaviour to be honest, although admittedly maybe because I don't quite understand it - in the sense that I have not yet spent a single penny on micro-transactions in games like the one I am currently working on. For context: I am currently employed by a large game company, although work in a small team. The game we are making is a "free to play" title and as such, this is something we are in fact guilty of. I should mention though that I believe I somewhat understand the ethical concern towards it, but in my opinion, this is a kind of "protecting people from themselves" thing, which I disagree with in principle. In terms of the "play longer" aspect of the question though I did play World of Warcraft for a good while, most of which I didn't particularly enjoy.

• DO YOU KNOWINGLY USE ANY KIND OF GAME OR PSYCHOLOGY THEORIES IN YOUR WORK, TO MAKE YOUR GAMES MORE APPEALING OR ADDICTIVE?

Not personally, as I am a service/server programmer, I am however well aware of the use in our game, which aims to incite people to spend money on micro-transactions.

• WOULD YOU CONSIDER USING PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH TO BETTER UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE AND/OR TO MARKET A MORE CRITICALLY/COMMERCIALLY SUCCESSFUL PRODUCT?

We make quite heavy use of analytics tools to better understand our audience, which I guess counts as it is definitely a form of "watching" user behaviour within our game.

With the apparent ubiquity of awareness among developers in relation to these issues, what could this tell us about the ethical implications a designer faces?

The ethics of video game design choices

In an article titled *Ethics Of Game Design*, Takahashi (2004) delves deep into the many legalities and arguments around the ethics of violent video games; with many prominent industry professionals of various roles and positions as well as media experts each giving their own, often contrasting, opinions on the subject. In a case study Takahashi cites a quote from a director of design, who explains that even though he personally targets the delivery of emotional content in his games, he doesn't think people shouldn't be allowed to make violent games like *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games, 1997-2015). Through this discussion, he also identifies opposing approaches to games design; entertainment focussed design and art focussed design.

In the wake of controversy over the *"ultra-violent"* video game, *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games, 2012), Shafer (Shafer, 2013) explores all kinds of morally questionable content in games. He goes on to describe his fear surrounding a game he was developing and the possible unintended messages the audience may perceive from its content and themes. He argues that we may not be able to measure the impact a game has, but that an impact does indeed exist. In conclusion, he hopes to create video games which challenge his audiences' expectations and belief's.

"...that is indeed something that weighs on me.
I don't want all of my creations to be about men at war." - (Shafer, 2013)

Shafer is among a number of developers who have spoken about the morality and ethics of games design. In an interview with Jonathan Blow - creator of the commercially successful and critically acclaimed, independently developed video game, *Braid* (Number None, Inc., 2008) - opines on how video games are as important to humanity as familiar art forms such as film and literature. He explains his hope that the medium of video games can be

developed into something more relevant to a wide swathe of society. In the interview Hill (2007) also states that it is Blow's belief that developers should design innovative, ethical and personal art to serve a player base who are hungry for inspiring games.

A common thread in the ethics discussion were arguments considering video games as an art form. While it may today be fashionable to call all manner of things an 'art form', discussions online suggest there is an argument both for and against games as works of art. To conclude this investigation it may be important to explore this argument if we are to find some deeper meaning, reason or perhaps context; in which video game design affects the consumer.

Video Games as an Art Form

"There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists." - (Gombrich, 1950)

Gombrich's statement may be classic but it is also true that to have a reaction you must also have knowledge. To be able to discuss with designers whether they consider video games as an art form it was deemed important to find respectable definitions of 'art'. To do so, a short interview was carried out with an art lecturer and a curator of a local art gallery, with the only question being, *"What is art?";*

"A MANIFESTATION OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT."

Art lecturer at Gateshead College

"ART IS SOMETHING THAT WILL CREATE AN EMOTIONAL OR PHYSICAL OR MENTAL REACTION IN THE VIEWER."

Curator at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art

These definitions were given - along with further questions - to the developers interviewed previously.

Interview with Artist & Game Designer at WiseWonky:

• DO YOU CONSIDER VIDEO GAMES A FORM OF ART IN ANY WAY?

> *Of course, it is to some degree art, I think that varies from company to company, I could hardly say Call of Duty 20 will be a work of art. More just a reliable way for a games company to make money. On that note, they have enough money to experiment and play around with new game ideas and I believe they may offer a new experience, but in the end, they will repeat this model until it runs dry. In the indie market it is very different. Most people have no rules, they are just making games. You are more likely to stand out when doing some very unusual or even unconventional. However, it's important to leave a lasting impression and ensure players will feel they have gotten value for money. So in some way money hinders all art, you might just have to come to the middle ground to be successful.*

• DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF MORE AS AN INNOVATOR OF NEW EXPERIENCES AND IDEAS OR A DEVELOPER WHO TAKES CURRENT CONVENTIONS AND REINFORCES/IMPROVES THEM?

I feel I may have already given you the impression that I consider myself an innovator. However, I think current conventions are wise to consider. If your game is completely alien then few people will be prepared to put in the time to learn these new mechanics, they are more likely to get frustrated and give up. I feel at the core I want my game to feel fresh and new but It also will share certain common conventions like boss fights and loot, However, if your core game-play mechanics are unique these conventions will need to be designed to align with them, making them unique too. To make a truly innovative game successful you need a lot of luck, I never imagined when I first played Minecraft that it would get so popular, I feel to a large degree no one can plan such a phenomenon.

• HOW DO YOU THINK THIS AFFECTS YOUR AUDIENCE?

I think my audience is leaning towards people who played the likes of Castle Crashers and The Binding of Isaac. Probably because both of those games graphics were drawn in flash like ours and on the surface, it looks like just a co-op dungeon crawler to play alongside friends, (which they seem to be happy with). I think they may be surprised at the game-play though. I think some find it fun and exciting and others find it frustrating or clunky. Although there are different weapons and mechanics to explore and I feel that's where our game makes a strong first impression. So there's somewhat of a split, it seems like mostly positive feedback. Making a large game with new mechanics is very risky. I would recommend making a small game based on the core mechanics you wish to implement, getting feedback and then if the response is positive, perhaps expanding on that into a bigger game.

Interview with Service & Server Programmer at Codemasters:

• DO YOU CONSIDER VIDEO GAMES A FORM OF ART IN ANY WAY?

Yes, I do, all of them in fact. Some I believe are more "artful" than others I guess? Kind of in the same way you can consider something like the Shawshank Redemption as art, but also the Expendables films.

• DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF MORE AS AN INNOVATOR OF NEW EXPERIENCES AND IDEAS OR A DEVELOPER WHO TAKES CURRENT CONVENTIONS AND REINFORCES/IMPROVES THEM?

As mentioned earlier I work as a programmer for a large game company, so my ability to innovate in terms of game features is quite limited, I do like to throw my opinion in when I can though, and generally prefer to pitch something new rather than something proven.

• HOW DO YOU THINK THIS AFFECTS YOUR AUDIENCE?

Well, our game releases in the middle of next month so I guess we'll see! Hopefully, it will be well received, but innovation always runs the risk of being unpolished, especially since we are not Blizzard and cannot afford to spend years with dedicated and helpful beta testers.

What does this mean for video games designers moving forward? While it may be a fun undertaking to analyse past titles with potential to have *been The Citizen Kane of Video Games* (Reparaz, 2009), it is more important to understand *why* they aren't in the other circles of society, outside of 'gamers'.

Video games as an artistic medium; moving forward

Ian Bogost (2007), a professor at Georgia Institute of Technology, argues that games need to mature, in a way that writing, photography and film have. He explains that contemporary games did not explore 'the possibility space of expression from end to end', that games designers should try to expand, to probe many expressive avenues as broadly and deeply as possible, in order to produce their equivalent to *Citizen Kane* (Citizen Kane, 1941). He also

states that games are an excellent medium to explore complex social problems such as healthcare, war or taxation; in a way that other mediums can't because they can force you to contend living with these problems from another person's perspective.

These issues are echoed in an interview with critically acclaimed director Guillermo del Toro (Brown, 2009), where he expresses his disappointment with *'big companies'*, comparing them to *'conservative'* film studios. However, he does envision a future where films, television, video games and print merge towards a single-platform *"story engine"*. This is perhaps something he was exploring with creative director Hideo Kojima – a highly respected veteran of the video games industry – in their recent collaboration, a unique *'playable teaser'* for *Silent Hills*. Interestingly the game – which had been hailed as *'revolutionary'* by fans of the franchise – was cancelled for an undisclosed reason. Reacting to the new video games journalist Kyle Bosman (Defy Media, 2015) laments that games like this are unprecedented, unlikely to happen again and that games like this *"can't exist"* in the video games industry right now because it's so hard to make money with the blockbuster-eclipsing budgets of big games titles.

Hideo Kojima's opinion on this subject is more widely publicised but can appear to be enigmatic. Gibson (2006) cites an interview in *Official PlayStation Magazine 2* (U.S.) where Kojima likens video games to an art museum, a place where their creators can showcase art but at the same time, however, he points out that the interactive nature of the games makes them more like cars. Furthermore, concept cars have artistic elements in the visuals, making them art even if they're not driven. Moreover, the many different experiences people have of actually driving a car, the interactions with that subject, are not considered art.

> *"Art is something that radiates the artist, if 100 people walk by and a single person is captivated by whatever that piece radiates, its art. -* **Hideo Kojima, Eurogamer** *(Gibson, 2006)*

Discussion & Conclusions

What I expected to find

1. A reason as to why games are often made to be violent and addictive, due to a large number of games that are criticised for being so and the media coverage and research I've been exposed to on the topic.
2. An explanation or at least examples of the consequences of these design choices.
3. A large community of gamers who hold strong opinions that games do not affect them negatively.
4. A vocal majority from older generations who consider video games to be a childish activity or are afraid it is causing gamers to imitate the violent acts which are portrayed in games.
5. Research, opinions and case studies which either support or conflict with two group's opinions, as well as show how society reacts or thinks about the issues raised.
6. Developers who consider their work in at least some way an art form, and from that;
7. Some examples of developers who have considered and felt some duty of responsibility for the issues raised by critics and have therefore changed or formed their design philosophy around the fact that they want video games to succeed at a higher intellectual level. Which should give the argument of video games being able to be art more weight, when considered against other forms of entertainment which are considered art by present-day society.
8. Comparisons with other forms of media historically.

What I found

Firstly; plenty of opposing, even sometimes polarised, opinions, research and coverage of the issues.

There are well evidenced scientific theories which can explain how violence and conflict are attractive to society in general; and the possible consequences of exposure to violent media, especially for children. That is it is easier to for the developer to program a death state and for the player to understand that as a feedback mechanism, which inherently makes conflict and by proxy violence a useful gameplay mechanic.

Gamers seem to hold views that correspond to what I expected. In their passionate survey responses, they feel their medium is often singled out, yet they seem to be fully aware of ways in which video games could be seen to be more influential or impactful when used to portray violent acts. Yet many disagreed with the idea that it is the designer's responsibility to do anything about it. It seemed that the majority of responders don't want to accept compromise. They feel the audience is capable enough to handle the content without too many adverse effects to society, with only children and those identifying themselves as pre-disposed to violent behaviour expressing worry.

Some people try very hard to get games like that banned. An often mentioned critic who is demonised among the gaming community is Jack Thompson; a well-known self-proclaimed "educator" who I've read calls gamers knuckleheads and likens playing games to mental masturbation. These polar extremes in opinion are leading the whole debate nowhere fast and only deepen animosity between the two sides of the debate.

When it comes to giving critical merit to a violent video game, Brandon Jones & Ryan Stevens (Defy Media LLC, 2015) discuss how gameplay mechanics, message and context are more important issues; are you 'gloriously' killing Nazis in Wolfenstein or are you an armed sociopath killing civilians and police officers in Hatred? Forbes, The Guardian, Rock, Paper, Shotgun and Kotaku have described Hatred as a "mass murder simulator". Note: It is yet to be released, so it remains to be seen if there is any social commentary or deeper purpose. I wouldn't expect there to be the way the game has been marketed.

Comparing aggression surveys against established theories and existing studies such as *Psychology of Popular Media Culture - Violent Video Games and Real-World Violence: Rhetoric Versus Data* (Patrick M. Markey, 2014), as well as the comparison to violence in other entertainment media such as film and TV. In it, they state *"Laboratory and correlational studies often find a link between violent video games and minor or benign forms of aggressive behaviours. Based on these studies, the media, lawmakers, and researchers often imply a link between violent video games and violent criminal behaviour…Contrary to the claims that violent video games are linked to aggressive assaults and homicides, no evidence was found to suggest that this medium was positively related to real-world violence in the United States."* Clearly, there is an interest games addiction and the presented case study from Korea shows that the more socially relevant games become the more likely it is the government will do something about it.

These issues exist, some are taken more seriously than others but each has valid research behind them, past the sensationalist headlines we see in the media. While I can't specifically state that traditional media has a more biased view of video games, it does seem that media outlets with roots in traditional news formats tend to focus more on the negative, sensational articles which contrasts with the focus of new media in letting strong positive opinions, such as those of Jane McGonigal, explaining how *Gaming can make a better world* (TED, 2010) or Gabe Zichermann, who makes a case for gamification, which he describes as *"the process of using game thinking and mechanics to engage audiences and solve problems"* (TEDxKids, 2011). Even finding news articles that say *Violent Video Games Don't Influence Kids' Behavior* (Dotinga, 2015) through new media sources online, you still have criticisms of the medium. Which often seems to cause defensive reactions from the games industry.

While video games have been banned in recent history, due to their content or themes, it is also true that many songs, books and films have also throughout history been banned or censored, including religious texts such as the Bible. Thought I didn't' touch on them it's interesting to note other works produced in the longer-standing visual, literary and performing arts. Adolf Hitler autobiographically can outline his political ideologies in *Mein Kampf* (1925) while the Buddha can teach his principles of self-enlightenment in *The Noble Eightfold Path* (Buddha, n.d.). It seems

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that in all entertainment mediums there are people or groups who justify a message through the use, suggestion or rejection of violence.

Do I agree with the findings?

I don't necessarily agree that using violence as an easy gameplay mechanic in games is a good excuse.

I do agree with contextualisation of violent acts being an important thing. However, the contextualisation of violence in a video game can extend beyond any agenda or control of the creative director, with the development of video games being influenced by those who fund them, including publishers, sponsors and investors. Both *America's Army* (United States Army, 2013) and *Special Force* are military first-person shooters, published by the United States Army and Hezbollah, respectively. Critics have highlighted the issue of these politically driven games, calling them a '*recruitment device masquerading as a toy'* (Turse, 2003), while others – Hassan Jomass in article *Video games attract young to Hizbollah* (Harnden, 2004) – postulates that they're not just for fun, that they're a way to teach the young to be patriotic, to know their enemy better and that playing video games with an opposing message could '*corrupt'* youths, through representations of their culture which are perceived to be negative. I don't agree with contextualising violence as a means to further a political agenda. I speculate this only ties in with social psychology explanation of historic violence. Simply put; our violence is good, justified and righteous; theirs is bad, unjustified and sinful – the *"us vs. them"* debate.

It seems I can agree or disagree with both sides of the argument when it comes to the effect of violence in games that children have access to. In the article written about an 8-year-old child shooting his grandmother immediately after playing Grand Theft Auto, publisher Take-Two Interactive flatly reject the associations made between the content of their game and the events described. Their quote read *"Ascribing a connection to entertainment -- a theory that has been disproven repeatedly by multiple independent studies – minimised the moment and sidestepped the real issues at hand".* Electronic Arts were quoted in the same article, saying the industry faces a *"perception issue"*. Meanwhile, a Colorado Governor spoke out soon after the shootings at the Sandy Hook school in the US – an event which also had a negative video game related spin in some media coverage. Of this, the Governor said, *"There might well be some direct connection between people who have some mental instability and when they go over the edge -- they transport themselves, they become part of one of those video games,".* I understand the need to defend the medium from a developer's point of view and agree that blaming violent behaviour on games is scapegoating but disagree that it's simply a perception issue as EA put it as I think designers, publishers and the audience need to steer the medium away from those negative connotations. Also, the governor's comments show that people with positions of power in society understand there are multiple factors and that games can contribute to existing issues in society such as mental health.

While games may not be considered by all to be pieces of art, I would agree that by the very definition or description of others I've been given, that video games are getting closer to art at least. The developers I interviewed are approaching their craft as an art form even others aren't. Meanwhile, players are reacting to these games, more so than simply pieces of entertainment. *That Dragon, Cancer* (Ryan Green, 2014) can have *"players bursting into tears"* (Stuart, 2015), while my own first relatable experience happened over a decade ago when I was awash with sorrow at the death of a tragic heroine in *Final Fantasy VII* (Squaresoft, 1997). Whether it was a *'manifestation of the human spirit'* or *'something that would create an emotional… physical or mental reaction'* there seemed to be a message that was communicated by the creator and received by me, the player.

Johnathon Blows interview quotes are interesting, and I can agree with him in a sense. The player base Blow talks about targeting are most likely the growing audience of mature gamers. Those who find they have less free time, more disposable income and are after a more meaningful experience.

This is where I agree with video games enthusiasts, because if a child reads books all day a parent may be happy because of a common perception that literature is educational or at least positive to their development. If a child

play's video games all day they are often seen to be neglecting their health and future for little to no gain. However, from personal experience and through my own research I've found people with relatable experiences that feel like their main form of entertainment can be just as educational, insightful and affirming as more traditional media.

Has this investigation changed my opinions?

Video game addiction may be more than a useful metaphor for the phenomenon. However, if there is no guidance on the issue, how can someone who considers themselves addicted to video games seek help? You can imagine if it becomes a medically recognised addiction that equivalent countermeasures are used in society as there are for; slot machines, government warnings; alcohol, drink awareness ads; tobacco, graphic warning labels. There are sources online which try to address the need for publically available information, such as video-game-addiction.org or videogameaddiction.co.uk, websites providing advice and point of contact treatment for people who are willing and able. Many healthcare providers (e.g. NHS Choices) also have some information on the topic, even if they can't categorise it as a disorder itself.

I feel I've developed more of a worry than an opinion on the matter. If the issues surrounding video games aren't addressed as seriously, could we be looking at an issue of similar concern to the present day childhood obesity issues? I'm thinking that with an ageing generation who grew up with video games as part of their daily lives and high youth and male unemployment rates (McGuinness, et al., 2015), it's a matter of *how long* until this starts to become a real problem?

In regards to the subject of games as art, my opinions have been informed by examining the different opinions of games developers who looking to create more artistic experiences. The phrase "Entertainment focussed design and art focussed design." – which harkens back to the ludology and narratology debates – has given me an easier way to phrase future debates on the matter.

Comedian Louis C.K. uses the phrase *"driven by fear... and not intention"* when describing how the art form of comedy is different from other arts. In that same way, "Bad" video games seem to me to be driven by imitation more than innovation. That approach often makes sense when I consider the creative process and that any new thing is usually just built on top of what others have established. I feel I have to accept these facts, however, as seen in film or literature they'll always be works which are artistically driven by the intention of their creator and then those which are imitations, produced out of a fear of being commercially unsuccessful.

McNeill responding to Cook saying that Pay-to-play model and behavioural psychology so tightly knit; no good games come out of it. McNeill (2013) disagrees and argues that it is not the payment model alone which corrupts any artistic intent, it's the design choices that make games bad. I agree with McNeill in most cases, though there are examples of games which had their artistic vision compromised by budget and if moving to a different payment model has been the only reason the game was published successfully, without subverting the designers true intent, then I now see that as a suitable middle ground where the business of art can survive.

More research will happen but I don't think it's required for us to make changes now in the way we design these games today. Tabaco causes cancer, high sugar foods are as bad as fatty foods; things are being done to reduce the impact on our society but it takes a long time for people to change their perceptions and habits. Just like it'll take a long time for people to find the same middle ground to advance video games in the pro/anti-video games before we start to see consumers demanding higher standards of designers.

I would draw parallels with other entertainment industries such as film, where big studios risking big budgets are often more inclined to play safe with sequels to established properties using more formulaic approaches to production; meanwhile the smaller, independent art house studios take risks for the sake of creating something that has greater emotional content and artistic merit.

While I wouldn't say I have concretely covered what I set out to I believe my approach was perhaps too broad for the scale of the subject involved. I didn't get to write about many things I felt were contributing factors or many examples which could provide further insight. What I do want to take out of this is one question. Why not take more time during the design phase to really create something that not only stands out but is thoughtfully designed and has that emotional content or impactful experience that gamers want and deserve? I guess that's the nature of the beast I the end, the struggle between vision and reality which we all have to resolve in ourselves in some way.

Future considerations and further research questions

- What is the effect of games design on consumers of other forms of media?
- Examine how game design principles being used to augment consumer products and services (gamification) and considering any negative opinions surrounding that.
- With game mechanics being included an increasing number of non-game activities it may be useful to understand how systems originally designed for video games change our behaviour towards these activities.
- What is the importance of these issues in a wider social context?
- Are these issues currently important to society and if not should they be?
- Do the issues explored pose significant risks to a person's mental or physical health and therefore should they be considered important issues in society, now or possibly in future?
- What can or are designers going to do about it, if so?

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