Four short essays written by undergraduate students which focus on contentious issues affecting the video games industry.

Introductory note by the editors in chief

When this journal was launched in the beginning of 2012, it was the intention of its editors to provide a research journal, which would be different, more exciting and experimental, in terms of its content. We wanted to shed light on information, which is seldom published. We have processed and published essays, dissertation chapters and even papers based on whole dissertations written by both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

In this file – for this is not a single paper – we aim to push the boundaries of academic journal publishing a little further, by combining four short essays written by undergraduate students. These students at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) were challenged to write a short essay on a controversial issue of relevance to video games, in less than 2000 words. They had to provide background information on the subject, discuss the conflicting arguments, compose some conclusions, and include a carefully selected list of references.

This was indeed a difficult challenge. Is it possible to examine an issue, gather information from an impressive list of background sources, assess the main arguments, and draw some reasonable conclusions...in less than 2000 words? Inevitably, the main purpose of these essays was not to find and examine each and every single source of information in the literature. Rather, the aim behind this assessment was for the students to choose and read a select few sources, and to write a short piece, which is factual, and which gets straight to the point.
Can Video Games Reflect National Culture?

An essay by Blair Inglis

Abstract

It can be said that film, music and other media can reflect the culture of the country where they originate from. However, with such a wide diversity of virtual environments in video games, can this medium ever really reflect the culture of the nation where the game was developed? In recent years, UK tax breaks have been proposed for games that are “significantly British” and reflect British culture. However, this logic appears to be flawed, and has prompted several questions. Do video games not have their own culture? Is the British government being misinformed, or can British video games really be considered a significant demonstration of British culture? And if so, what makes a video game “cultural”?

This paper will examine the culture displayed in certain video games and video game “fandom”, as well as the culture of relevant nations (namely Japan), and consider whether video games exist as one culture spanning the medium, or if this form of media can reflect and contribute to the culture of any given nation.

Keywords: culture, video games, popular culture, Japan, Britain, nation

Introduction

This short paper is a study of current video game culture as a whole, as well as the social aspects of games which give individual titles their own unique cultural principles. The aim of this paper is to consider whether a game can be defined either by its distinct individual sense of community, or by the various cultural threads inspired by its nation of origin. The main questions are essentially these: can inhabitants of virtual worlds share a sense of society? And if so, is it still possible for this virtual world to reflect the culture of the nation where it was produced? Thirdly, should this be a requirement?

There are clear differences, not only among Eastern and Western forms of interactive entertainment, but among interactive entertainment works from individual nations. This may be an extension, not only of a given society’s culture, but of other media including film, music and art. Could it be that video games are a culmination of all of these other forms of entertainment, which create the very notion of popular culture?

It has never been an easy task to define a video game, particularly because the video game medium is in its infancy, compared with several other forms of media. Some of the many definitions of video games and gaming will be examined, with a particular focus on individual cultures and the distinct differences of Eastern and Western developers.
Literature Review

Defining the culture of the medium

Previous examinations of the culture surrounding games have compared them with art. Building upon Bourdieu’s (1996) suggestion that art has a specific “illusio” at its core, Kirkpatrick (2012) suggested that games can be seen as a “social construct” - the basis for their cultural standing, and emphasised that games are still largely defined by their social status:

“...any given game will be judged upon its gameplay...with people knowing that this is a mainstream field and judging individual games accordingly.”

Kirkpatrick also referred to Bourdieu’s idea of an illusio, placing gameplay at the core, stating that, “The characteristic sensations of gameplay could form the basis of gaming’s illusio.” Kirkpatrick provided a well-rounded analysis of the early period of gaming culture, referring to how video game-focused magazines and their appraisal essentially shaped video games as a whole, defining the larger culture surrounding the medium.

Individual game culture

Mäyrä (2010) studied the act of cheating in the culture of gaming. In one paragraph (which contained a reference to the book, Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games by Consalvo (2007), Mäyrä discussed whether games have their own culture or can only be individually considered as a subculture. Consalvo argued that, “Some gamers do seem to belong to a culture distinct from mainstream society...” but concluded that the term “subculture” is “...too limited to adequately explain the broader world of games”. so Consalvo opted for a new term, gaming capital, as it “captures the dynamism of gameplay as as well as the evolving game and paratextual industry”. This was an idea that games both have and do not have their own culture.

Steinkuehler (2006) stated that games “simultaneously function as both culture and a cultural object”. She also stated that games “provide a representational trace of both individual and collective activity”, suggesting that games transcend the labels of both “individual culture” and “national culture”. Her article had a focus on Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) and reflected Castronova’s (2003) idea that we can study games in order to understand how cultures themselves are shaped and how they evolve and devolve. Steinkuehler stated that not only do video games have their own culture, but that they can teach us and even define how culture works, thanks to an “ability to simulate entire worlds and cultures populated by actual individuals working in concert (or discord) with one another”.

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Morris (2003) examined online multiplayer games and the “modding” of games, namely the first person shooter game *Doom*™. She argued that online games have spawned a culture of their own due to the community and the creative modification aspects. She stated that with regards to *Quake II*™, “83% [of the community] had completed some sort of creative project related to the game”. She described this co-operative creation as an “open-source, code-sharing culture” and dubbed the games as *co-creative media*, into which both the developers and players have made contributions.

**Discussion**

**National popular culture**

Nations have their own individual cultures, which can be reflected within video games themselves. Japan is a notable example of this individual popular culture, as Huat (2004) made it clear:

“Japan is the leader that sets the industry quality standard and is the prime production and export location, with relatively little importation from the rest of the constituent regional locations.”

The cultural style of video games developed in the Far East appears to be clearly distinct from Western conventions, partly due to this notable difference in popular culture originating from Japan. Two of the biggest game publishers - Nintendo and Sony - have their roots firmly set in the culture of their home nation of Japan. It appears, from examples within video games themselves, that it’s often more where the game developer is situated - rather than the game publisher - that this apparent reflection of culture is seen.

Japanese developers often opt for role-playing games (RPGs) which are heavily influenced by *anime* and *manga* media, and the Japanese culture itself. Blasingim (2006) explored these influences, compared games with other Japanese media, and stated:

“One of the most distinct differences between games produced in Japan and those produced by Western publishers is the relative emphasis on narrative structures involving resolution and continuation.”

This statement alone suggests that a nation’s (popular) culture can be reflected in a game, though it does not infer that games cannot have their own culture (which in turn is influenced by these overarching cultural threads).
Culture and cultural objects

As mentioned, Consalvo (2007) and Steinkuehler (2006) considered the notion of games having their own cultures. Consalvo emphasised the sense of the gaming “community”. Steinkuehler posed a further question: how can games be a cultural object of their own, and a part of their homeland’s culture?

Steinkuehler mentioned that “concerned politicians, parents and citizens tacitly use titles such as Grand Theft Auto™ or Everquest™ in emblematic ways to discuss genuine concerns about broader social issues such as violence and aggression”, thus showing how a game’s individual culture can be represented in the real world, for bad or for good.

A Lack of Culture?

Could we see a new influx of culturally British games in the future? Her Majesty’s Revenue & Customs (HMRC) have recently proposed video game tax relief in the UK, allowing developers to claim on their expenditure providing the game is “culturally significant.” Would this possibly distract from a developer’s artistic vision? Is there a need for culturally British games?

Video games may borrow traits from the cultures of the nations where they are produced. There are few examples of video games which are closely based upon the contemporary culture of any given nation – a perhaps for a good reason. Games are virtual worlds and, as put by Coller and Scott (2009), they “offer their players escapism or fantasy, stirring the imagination with a sense of unlimited possibilities.”

A tax relief scheme for “culturally British games” might do more harm than good for the British game industry - strict tax relief could end up with, as According to Síthigh (2010), such a narrowly defined tax scheme might prompt other nations to ‘tempt’ developers to leave the United Kingdom, just as was the case when there was no form of relief.

Video games may share something in common with any given nation - particularly the ones where they were developed – but this is not necessarily a requirement. It is evident that this form of entertainment can thrive without containing blatant references to the country or society where they were developed. Furthermore, there will always be ideas taken from the real world which will be incorporated into these virtual environments.

Conclusion

Games are neither cultures in themselves nor cultural objects – rather, they are both. Games are a dynamic, interactive entertainment that, when played online, can spawn communities and even cultures of their own.
Four short essays written by undergraduate students which focus on contentious issues affecting the video games industry.

A video game could be developed as a demonstration of British culture, providing that this is the developer's direction alone, rather than ideals forced upon them. The HMRC’s tax relief agenda may seem misinformed and obtuse; many would argue that video games should not be constrained to certain rules, as no form of art should.

Japanese popular culture is not only reflected in Japanese video games; it inhabits it. This is reflected in video games produced by Sony and Nintendo. Their staple exclusive franchises often borrow from Japanese culture, but meticulously craft cultures of their own. Several games produced in “The West” (United States, Europe) may not seem as inspired by the society around them, but the following on games with online multiplayer components further proves that games can harbour their own cultures and their own communities within.

References


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Four short essays written by undergraduate students which focus on contentious issues affecting the video games industry.

Causes of Video Game Addiction

An essay by Graeme Watt

Abstract

The video game industry has expanded vastly during the last decade, with the release of many new titles by games companies attempting to protect their own market share. This competition amongst developers encourages them to utilize strategies and tactics in order to make the games immersive and also addictive. Is this an acceptable style of development, and what is being done to protect those with addictive tendencies?

This paper explores how video game developers are tailoring their games to make players want to play more often and for prolonged periods of time; and what affect this has on their player base. This will be achieved by examining: (i) the causes of addiction; (ii) the tactics which are employed to make players keep playing; and, (iii) what is being done to help players who have become addicted to online video games and to prevent other users becoming addicted.

Introduction

It is by the nature of their design that games are intended to be engaging and enjoyable. It has been found (Prensky, 2001) that a successful game is composed of certain basic elements which, when combined, connect strongly with the user. This strong connection enables developers to retain the attention of its customers, increase sales of future titles, content releases and product merchandise. As with all forms of media, videogames are released as part of a business strategy with the ultimate goal of making money. Some developers aim to make money for themselves, while others aim to make money to enhance their games. Whatever the reasons, developers aim to generate as much money from their player-base as possible.

In order to achieve this goal, games are designed so that they have three main components: (i) a sense of achievement; (ii) social interaction; and (iii) immersion (Yee, 2006). These components create a connection between players and the games they play; te this grows into a dedication and commitment to the game, and thus to its developers:

- **Sense of achievement**: this is gained through advancement and competition with others; key game mechanics; character optimisation; ‘min-maxing’; and, numerical analysis, all of which create a strong foundation for player incentive.
- **Social interaction** with teammates, social groups or competitors creates a real world link to the game through others that play it. This enhances the gameplay by creating a sense of community and belonging.
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- **Immersive gameplay** is created through highly skilled storytelling, characterisation and real world escapism provides a safe environment for players.

With all of these systems in place, many users choose to spend more time in this fantasy setting than in their real lives, an approach which is similar to that to people addicted to many mood enhancing substances. (Ko, 2009)

**Literature Review**

Given the key game design features mentioned above, it is important to consider the likelihood of players becoming addicted to video games, and how game addiction affects their lives.

In a study into the demographics of players affected by video game addiction, Van Rooij (2011) found that 80% of respondents who regularly play online games were male; and that the average age of adolescents playing video games online was around 14 years old. The two main online game genres identified in the study were MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) and FPS (First Person Shooter) games.

Ng and Wiemer-Hastings (2005) conducted a closer study into the MMORPG genre in an effort to understand the extent to which users were playing games of this genre. When asked if they had spent more than eight continuous hours playing any online game in a single session, 80% of MMORPG players said they had done this, compared to 46% of Non-MMORPG players. This in figures suggests that there is a fundamental design of games within the MMORPG genre which causes users to play for more prolonged periods of time. In the same study, participants were asked to estimate how many hours per week they spend playing online video games. As shown in Table 1, the researchers identified a strong correlation between games of the MMORPG genre and the amount of time users spent playing video games, compared to those playing games of different genres.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hours per week</th>
<th>MMORPG players</th>
<th>Non-MMORPG players</th>
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<tr>
<td>0–1 h</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<td>1–2 h</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>38%</td>
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<td>3–6 h</td>
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<td>7–10 h</td>
<td>13%</td>
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<tr>
<td>11–20 h</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>21–40 h</td>
<td>34%</td>
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<tr>
<td>40 or more h</td>
<td>11%</td>
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*Table 1*: hours per week spent on gaming by MMORPG and Non-MMORPG players in percentages (taken from Ng and Wiemer-Hastings, 2005)

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The fact that players of MMORPGs often spend more time playing their preferred game does not alone prove that those users are addicted. Chappell (2006) studied the interactions of users who appeared to be addicted to the then popular MMORPG *EverQuest™*, taking statements from them of their personal experience with the game. One user who had come to terms with the addiction made this remark:

“I have withdrawn from my friends, family and roommates. I constantly think about EQ. If I'm not on I'm checking websites...I even dream about EQ sometimes...I know that I can't wean myself off. I must do it cold turkey. Now it's just a question of actually doing it”

This statement might sound similar to statements by people suffering from other clinical addictions such as gambling and substances (drugs). Given the severity of other clinical addictions and the effects they can have on other aspects of the subject's life, it is important to identify what problems an addiction to video games may cause for those affected.

Following an analysis of case study examples of video game addicts, Wood (2008) suggested that many of those who appeared to be addicted to videogames were instead affected by other underlying problems. This view is echoed in other performed case studies (Weinstein, 2010), where those involved in that study were found to have deeper underlying problems, and were using online video games as a means of escape. In addition to this, many of those who were questioned as part of another study (by Wan, 2006) stated that although they did not have any underlying problems that they were trying to avoid, they believed their gaming habits were a result of poor time management and organisational skills. Young (2009) suggested that users who are addicted to video games should seek therapy in order to overcome their addiction, and to understand why they have become dependent on videogames.

**Possible solutions**

As mentioned, it appears that many of the surveyed users who were self-confessed video game addicts were in fact trying to hide from other underlying problems. Examples included bullying, depression and financial difficulties, and the addicts tended to use the game as a means of escapism. However, it is still worth noting that developers of certain games are intentionally designing them in such a way that players feel safe and immersed while playing them.

The combination of both patterns creates the impression that players are addicted to these online video games, and will not face the real world and deal with real-world problems. Polack-Wahl (2007) suggested that a potential solution to this problem is at the disposal of the developers of MMORPGs. Developers of these games should track the length of time some users are spending online,
and inform the users. This would be a direct and simple way of making users aware of the length of time they are spending, although such warnings would be ignored by many users.

A second way for developers to ensure that users do not spend an excessive amount of time online would be to redesign of some key features and systems of their games. Instead of having quest systems that require players to complete them every day, developers could limit these to once or twice a week. This would reduce the demand on the players to be playing online each day, (Clark, 2006).

Clark (2006) also stated that although developers have a key role in preventing users becoming addicted, the lack of honest media coverage and education towards video games was another problem. Van Rooij (2009) claimed that little research is being performed into video game addiction, while other non-physical addictions such as gambling and shopping receive far greater coverage in both the media and medical organisations. This lack of education has resulted in people showing addictive tendencies towards many online games being misdiagnosed, and the real underlying problems being overlooked or ignored. In addition to this, the most simple and most common reason for users to become addicted to online video games is down to poor time management of the individual, this is seen most often in young males who lack appropriate prioritisation in their day to day lives (Anand, 2007).

**Conclusions**

The videogames industry has a responsibility to ensure that those who play online video games are doing so because they want to, and not because the design of the game is forcing them to. Many game developers aim to create a fun and immersive experience that players will enjoy. If this is achieved, players are more likely to spend long periods of time playing these games, and spend less time focusing on their real lives.

It is also the responsibility of parents, guardians and the media to advise people who use online video games as an escape to resolve their problems, using professional help and by changing their time management priorities.

**References**


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Racism in Videogames

An essay by Greg McDonald

Abstract

Videogames are often criticised for their role in glamorising violence to today's youth, and for making them reclusive (or, to use a phrase, "turning them into couch potatoes who never want to leave the bedroom"). However, one issue that isn't mentioned as much is the social content and narrative of these games. This article examines whether racism is an issue in videogames. How often do videogames feature racial minority characters such as Black, Spanish, Indian and Chinese people, and how are they depicted? How many games let players choose something other than the typical white male protagonist? Should racist stereotypes in games such as Super Punch Out™ serve to entertain as caricatures and be taken without offence, or should they be taken more seriously? Newer games such as the GTA series are more serious in tone (although not "po-faced") and feature more racial slurs. There are also games that were seemingly created by white supremacists such as Ethnic Cleansing™ (2002) which are altogether more worrying. This paper will examine whether these games affect the people who play them to the extent that they become subconsciously racist themselves.

Introduction

Racism in videogames has existed for many years. One of the more recent well-known controversies occurred with Capcom’s 2009 game Resident Evil 5™. In this game the player stars as a strong, white lead character that is slaughtering hundreds of African villagers. Indeed, the most famous example of a game with a black protagonist was GTA: San Andreas™ (Rockstar, 2004), and while in many ways CJ (the game’s lead) was a funny, likeable main character, he was still arguably a typical black American west-coast “gangsta” stereotype. Even if some would argue that CJ isn't a good character, he is still very much an exception.

This paper will examine some of the literature produced on the subject of racism in videogames, and the opinions about a gaming industry which has seemingly not given enough emotional depth to characters of different races. It will also look at research in the lives of “gold farmers” and how they are perceived by other players which can lead to real world racism.

Literature Review

This section will examine some of the existing journal articles on the subject of racism in video games; how many videogames feature something other than the white male protagonist; and, how other races are depicted.
University of Southern California Professor Dmitri Williams conducted a study in 2011 which found a significant lack of diversity in video game protagonists. The study compared the ethnic diversity found in a survey of 150 games across nine platforms and all ratings to categories contained in the American census. The study showed that fewer than 3.00% of video game characters were recognizably Hispanic, and none of these characters were playable. Native Americans and biracial characters were non-existent. 10.74% were African Americans, although with a caveat: they were mostly athletes and “gangsters”.

Research conducted by Leonard (2003) found that over 50% of game characters were white males, while less that 40% percent were black. This may not seem like too big a difference, but Leonard also took into account that over 80% of those black characters were real life athletes depicted in sports games (e.g. 82% of players in NBA games were black, and 65% of players in NFL games were black). This pattern has also been seen in similar games such as Madden™ (EA, **YEAR) and NBA2k™ (2k).

In another article, Leonard (2009) also examined how ethnic characters are depicted in games. Leonard studied the GTA™ series, and noted that the white gangs like the Mafia were made to look honourable with strong family values; whereas rival ethnic minority gangs like the “Triads” and “Haitians” were made to look like dumbstruck killers with no morals.

DeVane and Squire (2008) conducted a study which consisted of three groups of youths playing GTA: San Andreas™ (Rockstar, 2006). They studied the way the youths understood and absorbed the subject content of the game through interviews. Their three groups included: “The Casuals” (predominantly African American, aged 9 to 12); “The Athletes” (African American, aged 13-15); and, “The Gamers” (European American, aged 16 to 18). One youth in “The Gamers” group was critical of the game:

Interviewer: "What do you think about how race is portrayed in the game?"

Gamer 1: “I was gonna bring that up too. Your main character just got out of jail, a black dude in LA joining back up with a gang. All the gang members - the skinny guy and the fat guy - are smoking bowls and passing **** ...it’s so stereotypical, obviously.”

The “Athletes” took a different viewpoint. They identified themselves in the game’s main character CJ, and liked the fact that there was a mainstream game featuring hip-hop music and culture, and that the game featured issues they felt they could relate to.

Sports games also feature ethnic stereotypes. The NBA™ and NFL Street™ series were popular games in the early to mid-2000s and featured simplified versions of basketball and American football. According to Robinson (2006):
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“White players are practically non-existent in this game that revolves around hard-hitting, muscular beasts. All the bodies are stronger and ridiculously cut making the athletes look freakishly strong. The small numbers of white people that do feature in these games are much smaller in stature and, in the case of NBA Street, will have very accurate shooting rather than being a powerhouse.”

Nakamura (2009) discussed the possibility of videogames being a cause for racism. She researched the lives of “gold farmers”. (Gold farming is the selling of in-game currency to players for real money, usually through resellers such as eBay, and is hated by many other players.) Regular players have been joined by worker-players from poorer nations such as China and Korea who in turn are often subject to oppression as an unwanted, lower-class social group within the gaming world. These “farmers” produce and sell virtual goods such as weapons, garments, animals, and even their own levelled-up avatars or “virtual bodies” in MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games such as World of Warcraft™ or Everquest™) to other players for real world money. Steinkuehler’s (2006) analysis of Lineage II™, a Korean MMORPG, agreed with these findings, and concluded that these “farmers” were resented by other players, and that this feeling was even elevated to a real hatred. He discovered that much of the hatred was aimed at race; many gold farmers are Chinese, and Steinkueler noticed a distinct anti-Asian tone to many of the players’ protests.

Sisler (2008) researched the representation of Arabian and Muslim culture in video games and found that many games have middle-eastern settings. Examples include Prince of Persia™ and war-themed games such as Delta Force™ and Full Spectrum Warrior™. Most of these games represented Muslims as the enemy, especially in a post-9/11 world. Command & Conquer: Generals™ was a rare case which let the player play as a soldier of either US, Chinese or Arab forces. However, Sisler noted that while the US forces had sophisticated weaponry and intelligence, the Arabs were depicted as terrorists with car bombs and other simple forms of offence.

Discussion

Much of the research mentioned above contained a similar conclusion: races other than white have often been stereotypically designed in video games, perhaps more so than films or TV.

With regards to the controversy surrounding Resident Evil 5™, it is likely that no-one at Capcom is openly racist. The choices in the game are partly attributed to game design and some laziness on the part of the game designer’s side. In the days of 8-bit and 16-bit video games, the colour palatte was limited, and the designers tried to make the enemies to look different to the game’s protagonist.

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so they would “stand out”. Without thousands of polygons from which to choose, it made sense to simply make the enemies a different colour. Nowadays, consoles are capable of producing near-photorealistic graphics, but developers are often still working with the principle that gamers shoot the “thing that is a different colour” which is may be why there are hundreds of identical enemies in the likes of Resident Evil™, Uncharted™ and Call of Duty™.

Some researchers have noticed the trend, in that black men are depicted as muscular, streetwise people listening to hip-hop and decked out in garish jewellery and are not characterised by their intelligence, whether that be the fictional city of Los Santos from GTA: San Andreas™ or the street courts featured in the ghetto of NBA Street™. It has also been noted that some groups of gamers believed this isn’t an accurate representation, while others were not as perceptive or they truly believed it to be realistic.

Characters such as Barrett from Final Fantasy VII™, Sazh from Final Fantasy XIII™, Cole Train from Gears of War™ games or Sheva from Resident Evil 5™ have at least some elements in caricature. There are also white characters with these personality tropes, too such as Marcus Fenix in Gears of War™ or any of the identikit lead roles from the Killzone™ or Call of Duty™ series.

The GTA series are not the only video games which feature racial stereotypes. Nintendo’s Super Punch Out™ featured a fictional cast of boxers including the oriental Dragon Chan (a kick boxer from Hong Kong who kicks and regains health from meditation); black Jamaican fighter Bob Charlie (whose corner man tells him occasionally to "shuck and jive" or to “give yourself over to the rhythm, mon”); and the uncannily named Vodka Drunkenski (a Russian fighter who constantly drank bottles of vodka).

Mat Johnson, a professor in the University of Houston, spoke in an interview with Kotaku, and remarked:

"It's not a question of [developers and publishers] pushing culture forward. It’s a question of them catching up to mainstream culture. Part of it, I think again, is market success. But being better about Black characters and characters of other races would make the overall quality better, too."

Conclusion

It appears that black culture is not being under-represented in gaming. However, there is an issue in the way in which black characters are represented. According to some researchers, too many of them have been portrayed as muscular “knuckleheads” in stereotyped dress with stereotyped interests and behaviour. The attitude towards gold farmers is also a cause for concern, and
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may be contributing to racism against people living in some Far East countries. There is also some evidence that Muslims in the Middle East are also stereotyped in video games.

It is important to note that much of the research has focussed on how black characters are portrayed; this is partly because so few games feature Hispanic or Indian protagonists. It may be a different case for Asian characters as so many games are developed in Japan. For example, in Sleeping Dogs™, Asian characters are as well rounded and diverse as Caucasian characters.

There are other exceptions which have not been discussed. One example is the black character, Alyx Vance, in the game Half Life 2™, an intelligent woman who is feisty but fragile at the same time. Another example is the character, Donald “Sigint” Anderson, in Metal Gear Solid 3™, a weapons expert who would go on to become the chief of a technological arms company, who the player can call at any time to give them detailed intelligent advice on their current weapon or item.

Nevertheless, it appears that much work still needs to be done in the games industry to make black, Hispanic or Indian characters as engaging as white characters.

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Violence in video games

An essay by Ross Herbin

Abstract

This paper concerns the topic of violence in video games. Researchers of various articles have claimed that the video games industry is partly responsible for the rise of aggression in game players, some of whom have committed attacks and murder in communities. With the addition of enhanced graphics and gameplay in technology, some video games portray acts of violence towards other players, which some scientists and scholars deemed as unnecessary. However, other scholars have claimed that the in-game violence does not have long-term effects on human behaviour and that video games could also be used as a means to channel aggression from reality into a virtual world. This paper will explore the level of violence in video games, and whether or not prolonged exposure could affect the human mind, and whether or not violence in video games can be accepted in modern day society.

Development of video games technology and concerns

Over the years, the improvement of graphics, gameplay and storytelling in video games has enabled players to truly immerse themselves in the environment and feel a unique experience (KD Squire, 2003). Some people see this as having a negative effect upon society as a whole, and believe this is causing aggressive behaviour.

One recent example was the Sandy Hook School shooting that took place on December 14th 2012, where Adam Lanza shot and killed 20 children and 6 staff members. The media blamed the National Rifle Association (NRA), which responded by shifting the blame over to the currently growing games industry, insisting that Lanza was influenced by violent video games. The NRA’s executive Vice President, Wayne LaPierre, commented, “They portray murder as a way of life and then have the nerve to call it entertainment.”

This was not the first time someone suggested that video games were encouraging people to commit murder. The Columbine High School massacre that took place on April 20th 1999 was committed by two senior students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who enjoyed playing the first person shooter game Doom™. Accusations were raised that the boys played out their fantasy from the game into real life.

Ever since the 1980s, video games have been scrutinised over the content and exposure of violence portrayed to the user (Anderson and Ford, 1986; Ballard and Wiest, 1995; Irwin and Gross, 1995; Cooper and Mackie, 1986; Graybill et al, 1985; Graybill et al, 1987). These researchers yielded a mixture of conclusions. Anderson and Ford (1986) showed from an experiment of 60 college students...
that self-reports of hostile mood were more numerous after playing an aggressive game, than those from not playing a video game. By contrast, Strawniak et al (1987) reported no increase in violent thoughts in children who played violent video games. During then, (It should be noted that the amount (and graphic detail) of violence experienced in video games in the 1980s does not match the content available in video games today.) However, the question now is the same as it was three decades ago: does violent content in video games actually have an effect on how the mind behaves in the outside world?

**Review of Tests**

Over the years, research has been conducted into game players of three age groups: children (primary/elementary school); teenagers (high/secondary school); and, young adults (college).

Early research into the subject provided conflicting results. Dominick (1984) surveyed 240 high school students (44% of whom were male) and reported incidents of physical aggression, aggressive delinquency, and aggression in hypothetical situations when associated with playing games at the arcade (although the same cannot be said for when they were at home). By contrast, Egli and Meyers (1984) asked participants whether or not playing video games had a calming effect when they were upset, and reached the general conclusion that video gameplay was moderately calming to the mind. Kestenbaum and Weinstein (1985) observed the pattern of both aggression and calm in the experience of playing video games, and reported that players could use video games for sufficient relaxation or to vent frustration. More evidence for the calming effect of video games was produced by Scott (1995) who found evidence of catharsis: undergraduates had fewer aggressive feelings after playing moderately aggressive games, but felt an increase in aggressive feelings after playing highly aggressive games. Again, this appears to resonate with the idea that violent games may have positive effects, such as providing a safe means of venting aggression rather than fuelling it.

Some researchers concluded that participants who were young adults and played violent games had relatively faster reaction times to aggressive words than those who played a nonviolent game (e.g. Anderson and Dill, 2000), but others have claimed that there is no association between aggression/hostility and video game-play in young adults (e.g. Gibb et al, 1983; Scott, 1995; Alman, 1992). Irwin and Gross (1995) showed that young children subjected to aggressive video games demonstrated increased aggression towards others in a competitive or frustrating situation. Brusa (1987) conducted a different experiment and showed that there was no difference between the effect of aggressive and non-aggressive games (although Brusa also reported that the boys were more aggressive than girls before playing any video game; but their aggression had fallen to a level similar to that of girls after the video games). In
another experiment (by Lynch, 1994), results showed that pre-hostile and non-hostile subjects (aged 12 to 16 years) showed no differences in heart rate and blood pressure playing violent or nonviolent games.

Later research by Barlett and Rodeheffer (2009) involved the use of a realistic and violent video game (Conflict: Desert Storm\textsuperscript{TM}), a fictional and violent video game (Star Wars: Battlefront \textsuperscript{2TM}), and a nonviolent (tennis) video game to test the player’s aggressive feelings while in game. They concluded that:

- the players experienced an increase in aggressive thoughts over 45min of play, but that the realism of the violent content did not exacerbate that effect; and,

- that playing a realistic violent game increased aggressive feelings in the players after 15min of play or 45min of play, but playing an unrealistic violent game did not produce the same effect.

Some researchers have referred to the General Aggression Model (GAM) (by Anderson and Bushman, 2001, see Figure 1), which shows how aggression is triggered through both development and individual differences in susceptibility to the influence of violent video games. Both situational and personological variables interact to affect a person’s internal state. The internal state contains cognitions (thoughts), affects (feelings) and arousals (physical). All three of these influence each other, and each has an effect on an individual's interpretation of an aggressive act. In summary, according to Anderson and Bushman, people who play violent video games develop aggressive beliefs and thoughts which drive them to exhibit violent behaviour in real-life.

More recent studies by Ferguson \textit{et al} (2012) involved the completion of questionnaires and tests by children and adults (including parents). They found no evidence that video game violence is predictive of either positive or negative
behavioural outcomes in youth. Their correlational data showed that exposure to video game violence did not lead to aggressive behaviour or significant cognitive outcomes. Their other analyses showed no significant changes in aggressive or civic behaviours.

Discussion

Based on these cited studies alone, it is unclear whether or not the violent content of video games affects players in terms of aggression. The tests over the years have revealed many possible links including an immediate increase in aggression in young children after playing an aggressive game (and similar results with adults), when tested in an aggressive and frustrating situation (e.g. Dominick, 1984; Irwin and Gross, 1995). It should be acknowledged that users can become aggressive during a game depending on the person and situation at hand, and that the subjects’ personality and background should also be tested. Some researchers did not consider those factors, which could have shed a different light on their investigations.

Studies by Kestenbaum and Weinstein (1985), Egli and Meyers (1984), Brusa (1987) and Scott (1995) showed that participants were able to be calmed by gameplay, and that the continued use of video games could prove useful for venting out frustration in a virtual world where no actual bodily harm can be caused. However, Scott (1995) also mentioned that subjects experienced a high increase in aggressive feelings while playing a highly aggressive game, which would support the theory that video games with a high violence rating could have a negative effect on a person’s mind during gameplay. Alternative results (produced by Anderson and Dill, 2000) showed that players of violent video games would also have a faster reaction time to hostile/negative words said in real time, which shows that violent video games could possibly enhance the user’s reaction times, given the current situation and nature of the game.

The research conducted by Barlett and Rodeheffer (2009) has may have had a weakness, in that the games chosen may not have been equally difficult to play, and this could have resulted in slight differences in the aggression traits (increase in stress and/or excitement during gameplay). Secondly, the extent to which the gameplay was aggressive (i.e. the violence of the situation and graphical content) may have also been worth considering.

The results in a study by Ferguson et al (2012) showed that violence in video games had no positive or negative effect on a children or adolescents, and that the long-term effects experienced from video games would be minimal and not yield serious consequences. Similar results of video game violence posing neither positive nor negative effects in players were produced by Lynch (1994), who reported that no subjects felt changes in health including blood pressure and heart rate whilst playing video games. The structure of Anderson’s General
Aggression Model indicated the effects which violence in video games might possibly have on the mind, but Anderson never made an actual association of increased physiological activities being caused by playing violent video games.

Conclusion

The studies taken into account in this paper have proved very useful in structuring the arguments for and against the belief that violence in video games can have a serious effect on the human mind. A few of the studies shown from the 1980s until recently have provided interesting factors to prove that violence either does or doesn't have an effect on players.

It seems that the question still remains unsolved. Even with modern research, the GAM is a theory worth considering, but mentioned that people are affected by other sources of violence. Identifying violent video games as the sole cause of a player’s aggressive behaviour is not possible without investigating the subjects’ personality and background. People who are more hostile in personality may be more prone to aggression whilst playing video games; and the opposite may be said for more passive players.

References [accessed in April 2013]


Four short essays written by undergraduate students which focus on contentious issues affecting the video games industry.


