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Context and Critical Evaluation

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Cultural Study of Video Games

// Almost since their inception, videogames have been met with rampant prejudice, legislation and stigma. Indeed, they are often 'beneath popular culture'. This is usually related to violence, children and education, or diminished social skills. //

Southern Matthew (2001) The Cultural Study of Games More Than Just Games

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1. INTRODUCTION

As of the writing of this essay, home video game consoles have spent thirty-nine years sat in living-rooms around the world. The Magnavox Odyssey (Magnavox, 1972), the world's first home video games console, brought video games to the masses; although perhaps not as successful as its later successors such as Nintendo's hugely popular NES (Nintendo Entertainment System, 1983) console sold thirteen years later. A 2010 study of video game consumption in the US showed that 67 percent of households played video games (Entertainment Software Association, 2010) while the BBC reported that 59 percent of 6-to-65 year olds consumed some form of video game (Pratchett, 2005). A 2008 report announced that a massive 97 percent of 12-to-17 year olds in the United States play video games. (Lenhard, 2008)

But after thirty-nine years since their initial commercial introduction, transforming from an 'underground' activity to a socially accepted and endorsed method of entertainment, branching into a grand tree of genres, methods of interaction, platforms and social foundations, video games are still under intense prejudice.

Almost since their inception, videogames have been met with rampant prejudice, legislation and stigma. Indeed, they are often 'beneath popular culture'. This is usually related to violence, children and education, or diminished social skills. (Southern, 2001)

2. THE LATEST TO BE IN THE FIRING LINE

Society always has its conservatives. Every technological, sociological, political and academic advancement, change or introduction has its critics; commonly people who essentially fear change. Traditions and morals must be preserved. "Traditionalists are pessimists about the future and optimists about the past." (Mumford) One of the most received traditionalist voices is the newspapers and media, feeding the conservative society to which they broadcast their opinions on 'deviant' behaviour. This is nothing new; most groundbreaking and positive social advances have once been damned by their critics as 'heinous', 'unruly', 'deviant' among many other negative statements:

"The free access which many young people have to romances, novels, and plays has poisoned the mind and corrupted the morals of many a promising youth; and prevented others from improving their minds in useful knowledge. Parents take care to feed their children with wholesome diet; and yet how unconcerned about the provision for the mind, whether they are furnished with salutary food, or with trash, chaff, or poison?" (Hitchcock, 1790)

The telephone was described as making men "more lazy" motion pictures were demonized for "leading girls astray" and Rock and Roll was reported to turn people into "devil worshipers". Video games have only become commonplace during the past two decades, suggesting that they are the newest technological and sociological advance to become widespread. It is therefore unsurprising to find immense amounts

of opposition to the new entertainment form: “The disturbing material in Grand Theft Auto and other games like it is stealing the innocence of our children and it's making the difficult job of being a parent even harder.” (Clinton, 2005)

Upon observation, it is easy to conclude that video games are the next to be demonized based on natural progression. It is widely reported that video games promote aggressive and violent behavior, but we also know that video games can be used to inform and teach; video games have been used to educate in schools in the UK since 1995. Video games such Molleindustria's McVideoGame (Molleindustria, 2006) teaches and informs players about how McDonald's exploits land, farmers and customers in order to increase their profit margins.

3. VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION

Video games are continually attributed to violent and aggressive behaviour in children consuming them. Although debatable, the resemblance between some of these horrific crimes and scenes in violence is striking. Violent video games have been described as “brainwashing young people with a cult of violence, and also training them to kill at the same time” essentially accusing the video games industry for the “brainwashing of youth” (Chaitkin, Steinberg, & LaRouche, 2007). Numerous crimes: thefts, vehicular felonies, murders and massacres, have been directly linked to the influence of video games on the perpetrator.

3.1 Case Studies

The follow are a number of high-case incidents reported to be directly influenced by video games

3.1.1 Robert Steinhäuser

Robert Steinhäuser, a 19 years old in 2002 living in Erfurt, East Germany, rampaged through a his former school shooting and killing thirteen school teachers, two pupils and one police officer. As an avid enthusiast of the combat simulator Counter-Strike (Valve Corporation, 2000) the game was immediately blamed for Steinhäuser's horrific actions.

3.1.2 Warren Leblanc

2004 in Leicester (United Kingdom), Warren Leblanc repeatedly stabbed and killed a 14 year-old friend. The 17 year-old was accused of mimicking the virtual actions in the highly controversial video game Manhunt (Rockstar North, 2003); a game that was previously banned in Australia, Germany, New Zealand and Canada. The game rewards the player for the extreme actions of violence the game promotes. "Manhunt is, technically speaking, a third-person stealth game, but it is closer to an interactive

snuff film. You hide in shadows, wait for someone to happen by, sneak up on him, and then use, say, a scythe to separate the unfortunate victim from his genitals.”

(Bissell, 2010, p. 133) A month after the incident, police detectives investigating the murder rejected that there was any link with the game and that the motive was actually robbery.

3.1.3 Devin Moore

In 2005 Devin Moore, 18 years-old, shot and killed three Alabama police officers whilst being arrest for suspected vehicle theft. Moore’s defence was based on accusations of abuse as a child and that he was “trained” by video game “murder simulators”; Moore reportedly spent hundreds of hours playing what Attorney Jack Thompson described as “primarily a cop-killing game”. The games in question were Grand Theft Auto III (Rockstar North, 2001) and Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (Rockstar North, 2002); infamous for its’ intense violence, ability to have sex with virtual prostitutes and, importantly for the defence case, the ability to murder police officers and members of the public.

Grand Theft Auto is a world governed by the laws of depravity. See a car you like? Steal it. Someone you don't like? Stomp her. A cop in your way? Blow him away.

There are police at every turn, and endless opportunities to take them down. It

is 360 degrees of murder and mayhem: slickly produced, technologically brilliant, and exceedingly violent. (Bradley, 2005)

It remains unclear whether Moore was actually 'programmed' to be a murder by the virtual video game, but it was evident throughout the case that both Moore and his attorney believed that the combined effects of abuse and video game video game were indeed an influence and thus absolve him of responsibility for the shootings. Upon arrest Devin told officers "Life is like a video game. You've got to die sometime." Devin was convicted of all charges. (Game Spot, 2005)

3.2 Selective Reporting

It is certainly debatable whether violent video games can influence individuals to commit crimes and the similarities between the real crimes and virtual acts are evident. However perhaps this is circumstantial evidence. Grand Theft Auto IV (Rockstar North, 2008), the latest instalment in the video game series, has sold over 17 million copies worldwide with around 6 million of that consisting of UK sales (Video Gamer.com, 2010) in a country with a population of 61,838,154 (The World Bank, 2009) resulting in roughly 10.3% of UK population owning a copy of the game. The likelihood of a criminal owning or coming into contact with the game is relatively high – bearing in mind that this is only based on the sales of a single video game.

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On the 16th of April 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a 23 year-old student of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute killed 32 people and injured at least 15. Immediately video games were blamed for the influencing Cho's actions; again, the game Counter Strike (Valve Corporation, 2000) was blamed to have "brainwashed" and "trained" the perpetrator. "You won't stop school shooting spree until the multibillion-dollar video-"game"-killing-simulator industry is stopped from brainwashing youth." (Chaitkin, Steinberg, & LaRouche, 2007)

This claim was later disregarded by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, with no mention what-so-ever in their report to the President. It was previously known that Seung-Hui Cho was in fact mentally unsound, after stalking to women a Virginia court judge declared Cho "a danger to himself" and was sent for psychiatric treatment (Luo, 2007).

The aforementioned case study of Warren Leblanc's homicide resulted that video games were not linked to the incident. The fact that the game Manhunt (Rockstar North, 2003) was found in the victim's bedroom was simply circumstantial, yet exploited by media outlets. In a letter addressed to the Home Secretary David Blunkett, the Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers' Association (ELSPA) voiced their worries about the media coverage and demonization of the video games industry:

We have been very concerned recently about the misleading and disingenuous reporting about the effects of playing interactive games software, [...]

As you will know, despite many research projects into the effects of screen violence, some of which have been undertaken by eminent academics in their field, no link with violent behaviour has been found. (ELSPA, 2004)

3.3 Research Studies

A 2005 study ran by a team at the University of Missouri-Columbia is perhaps the most balanced and relevant study into video game violence and player aggression. While all of the studies' predecessors concluded that individuals who consume violent video games are more aggressive and more likely to commit violent crimes, critics argue that these studies simply proved that violent people gravitate toward violent video games, not that games change behaviour.

Bruce Bartholow and his team from the University of Missouri measured a specific brainwave called the P300 response; The P300 brainwave reflects brains evaluation of emotional content.

The study subjected 39 experienced gamers with varying amounts of time having played violent video games, to a collection of real-life images mostly of emotionally neutral scenes but exposed them to a number of violent and non-violent negative

scenes. The subjects with the most experience of violent video games had a lower P300 response; therefore less shocked and disturbed by the images than their less experienced counterparts. Bartholow concluded that “They become desensitised. However, their responses are still normal for the non-violent negative scenes.” This is not surprising when considering that video games have been used to desensitise soldiers to the violence of war. Battlezone (Atari, 1980) was modified by the US Army as a Bradley armoured fighting vehicle trainer; Doom (iD Software, 1993) was modified the US Marine Corps to attract new recruits; Counter-Strike (Valve Corporation, 2000) was used to test antiterrorist strategies of China’s People’s Armed Police.

The study concluded that people who play violent video games show a less emotional response to images of real-life violence such as gun violence, but not to other emotionally disturbing images such as dead animals or sick children. Ultimately, the study found that the reduction in emotional response correlates with aggressive behaviour. (Bartholow, 2006)

However despite such studies into the field of video games promoting aggression, critics and fellow researchers are still divided over the issue. According to the GAM (General Aggression Model) there are three internal states to aggression: cognitions (thoughts), affects (feelings) and arousals (physical) (Kooijmans, 2004). Bartholow’s study only assessed the emotional affects of video game violence; proving that exposure to violent video games decreases the individual’s emotional response.

Jonathan Freedman from the University of Toronto, who has also researched into the field on behalf of government reports, concluded that “all we are really getting is desensitisation to images. There’s no way to show that this relates to real-life aggression.” (Philips, 2005) An analysis that Professor David Buckingham from the Institute of Education also shares:

“The debate we are seeing is very similar to the one that has raged for years about TV. The truth is there are many factors that can lead to violence, such as being withdrawn and isolated, so it is hard to say it is because of one thing.”
(Buckingham, 2006)

3.4 A Question of Choice

It is almost never, if at all, reported or considered by those attacking video games, that the player does not have to rampage in the virtual universe, massacring everyone in sight. For this example I will be referring to one of the most publicised, demonised and bestselling video games attacked for its violent content: the Grand Theft Auto game series (Rockstar North, 1997-Present).

The story of a game is split into two very different and distinct categories: Narrative and ‘Ludonarrative’. One is fixed and the other is fluid. The narrative of games is

fixed, non-interactive and traditionally presented in the form of ‘cut scenes’; essentially short film clips in which the player is completely stripped of their control and forced to watch a scene take place. Ludonarrative is a relatively new term used to describe the story that the player creates. Ludonarrative is not scripted, it is fully gamer-determined; ludonarrative is basically the way in which the player plays the game. For example, a player playing Grand Theft Auto IV (Rockstar North, 2008) may be given the task to drive across the city to pick up a virtual character. The player can choose any route he wishes. The player could drive safely, abiding by the rules of the road, or they could choose to drive as fast as possible along the pedestrian path, running over as many virtual people in the process. The virtual police may see the player committing these crimes and engage in an epic pursuit; the chase may escalate to hundreds of police involved, police helicopters following the players every move as he races down back-streets. The player may escape police arrest and arrive at the designated location just as they would if they drove lawfully, but the ludonarrative between the two methods are completely different from each other.

But the crucial point is that the player does not have to illicit a blood-fest. The video game does not require the player to slaughter innocent virtual people in order to progress through it; it does not reward the player for doing so, if anything, it punishes the player for doing so. “As for the infamous cultural trope that in GTA (Grand Theft Auto) you can hire a prostitute, pay her, kill her, and take her money, this is also true. But you do not have to do this. The game certainly does not ask you to do this.” (Bissell, 2010, p. 173)

The game itself is very traditional when it comes to moral values. Most of the video game's enemies are cocaine addicts whereas the main character does not engage in illegal activities (except the ones he is dragged into by narrative circumstances). The character often struggles with difficult decisions, acts like a calm and sane individual and does not commit any horrifically violent acts during narrative cut-scenes whereas the player can control the character to be as violent as they wish during ludonarrative game-play. A lot of the game (and similar games) attempt to discourage such behaviour: the player cannot control the character to take drugs but they are able to get the character drunk. "When he gets drunk and plants himself behind the wheel of a car, dizzily awhirl in-game camera provides an excellent illustration of why drunk driving is such a prodigiously bad idea." (Bissell, 2010, p. 173)

3.5 Availability

All games to be released in the UK are exposed to scrutiny from PEGI (Pan-European Game Information) who use an extensive set of criteria in order to judge the acceptable minimum age for consumption (Fig 3.1) as well as assigning any necessary warnings about the video games content (Fig 3.2). It is illegal for a shop to sell any rated game to a customer that is below the age of the respected games classification; doing so results in the dealership being fined and the sales assistant who completed the transaction being prosecuted with up to six months in jail and a £5000 fine.



Fig 3.5.1 PEGI Classification badges (PEGI, 2009)



Fig 3.5.2 PEGI Content Descriptors (PEGI, 2009)

Earlier in this essay I documented three case studies of individuals committing acts of murder that had come into contact with violent games. These games were: Manhunt, rated 18; Grand Theft Auto, rated 18 and Counter-Strike, rated 18. Each of these individuals was reported to either be below the legal age for purchasing the game at the time of the homicides or below the required age when they had purchased the game. This begs the question: Is it really the video game industries fault for influencing potentially mentally undeveloped individuals, or is it instead an issue at distribution or parenting level? It is common that parents or older friends will purchase games for younger underage consumers; unlike alcohol, it is not illegal supply.

As the writer of this essay, I have firsthand experience with customers purchasing games with the intent of letting underage minors play them. During my employment at a video game store, I would encounter at least one customer purchasing an 18 rated

game each shift. A typical case is as follows: An elderly woman approaches the counter with their grandson who appears to be about 12 years of age, she hands me the box for Grand Theft Auto IV. I enquire: "Are you sure you would like to purchase this game, it is rated 18?" She gestures to her grandson, "Whatever he wants." I follow up with a phrase I have said many times to similar customers: "Do you know that you can have sex with prostitutes and kill them in this game?" - Almost every time I said this to a customer, I was met with an expression of shock and disgust. - "You're not having it!" She declares to her grandson as she leads the disappointed minor out of the store.

3.6 Conclusion

It is certainly evident that violent video games have an influence on an individuals' attitude but whether they influence them to commit criminal activities is still being fiercely debated. The question remains whether a person would commit the crimes without exposure to video games; it is almost unanimously agreed throughout researchers and critics that those who are already mentally unsound are at the greatest risk at rein acting horrific events captured in the virtual medium. The restrictions for purchasing such games are already and increasingly strict, but the point remains: "Simply being in someone's possession does not and should not lead to the conclusion that a game is responsible for these tragic events." (ELSPA, 2004)

4. CULTURAL INTEGRATION

Attitudes towards video games have been changing dramatically since Southern wrote his essay in 2001. The video games industry has been reinventing itself; targeting new immersing and non-gamer demographics, the birth of 'indie' game studios and growing seedlings into previously untouched social and cultural platforms.

Although video games began as an 'underground' activity, even a taboo subject of discussion at times (reflected in the thin array of academic studies of the field before the turn of the millennium), they are becoming increasingly integrated into our daily life; played by more people today than at any other time. This can be directly related to the dynamic nature of the industry; every generation of video game console becomes more accessible and attractive to demographics that had previously never played video games. This revolution of the video games industry can be related to a number of different stimuli, most notably the birth of what has been called the Casual Game.

The term 'casual game' is used to describe a new area of the industry, those games that target a demographic not typically known for playing games: Women, retired and older aged, socialites and 'non-tech-savvy' individuals. Eric Zimmerman, a manager and game designer at Electronic Arts explains the game publisher's immense challenge of changing the industry in order to target different audiences:

“I was surprised by how wired we were to a particular target audience of 18-34 year-old guys. It was a challenge to change the rule book of designing games for fraternity brothers.” (Kim, 2008).

The birth of the casual game industry was not the combined effort of the industry, but instead a number of separate and unique projects all being developed and released within short amounts of time between each other. The casual game industry can be separated into a number of areas: Hardware developers, distribution platform integration and small game development studios coined as ‘indie’ developers.

4.1 Hardware

For most non-gamer demographics the method of interaction with the gaming devices is the biggest deterrent. Video games demand the player to invest time developing a new set of skills in order to interact with the game; this time is often unfulfilling and not enjoyable.

I understand the frustration of not knowing which buttons to push, of being unfamiliar with the conventions on the screen, of being reluctant to invest hours, days, and weeks into playing this game, of being indifferent to the fiction of the game, of having a stupid machine tell you that you have failed, of being unable to fit a game into your life. (Juul, 2010, p. 5)

Video game developers have been directly targeting this problem. In 2006 Nintendo released the Wii video game console offering a unique and previously incomparable method of interaction. Nintendo created a controller that enables the holder to interact with the virtual environment using pre-defined and familiar physical skills. The player of Wii Bowling (Wii Sports, 2006) may have previously played real bowling and therefore understand the method of rolling the ball down the lane; this skill is transferred to the virtual platform by mimicking the tossing action with the console's controller. This method of interaction shot the console to the number one bestselling video game console of all time, selling 83.9 million units as of the 25th December 2010 (VG Chartz, 2010)

I was beginning to lose count of the times I had heard the same story; somebody had taken their Nintendo Wii video game system home to parents, grandparents, partner, none of whom had ever expressed any interested whatsoever in video games, and these non-players of video games had been enthralled by the physical activity of the simple sports games. (Juul, 2010, p. 1).

Jesper Juul labels this game interaction method as 'mimetic interfaces'. He cites Dance Dance Revolution, Guitar Hero and the Nintendo Wii as video games and devices that utilise this method of interaction. "In such games the physical activity that the player performs mimics the game activity on the screen." (Juul, 2010, p. 103)

4.2 Distribution and Social Engineering

Casual games are noted for their simplicity, lack of immersion and ability to abandon games at will; an interesting yet ironic juxtaposition to the industries battle for deeper narrative and physical immersion of game universes. It is believed that then they married and lived happily ever after, the end. These types of games fit perfectly on platforms that are fleeting such as mobile phones and web browser based games.

Facebook is now the biggest casual games distribution platform with over 22 million daily active users consuming at least one of the casual games on the social website (Osborne, 2010). Fig 4.2.1 displays the rapid growth of popularity that casual Facebook games are experiencing.

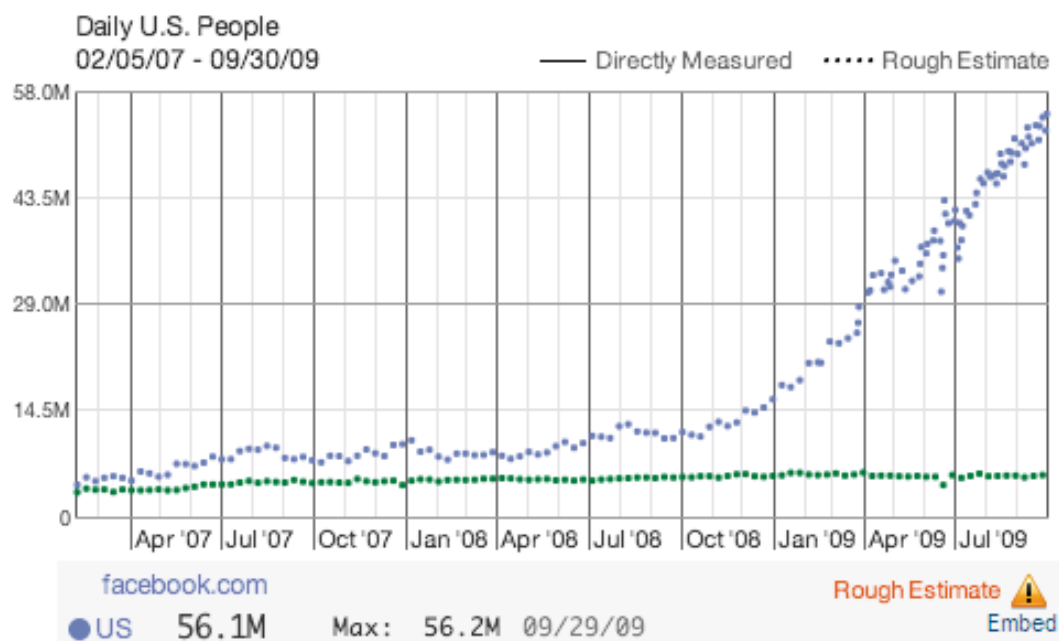


Fig 4.2.1 Consumption of Facebook Games over time. (InsideFacebook)

5. CONCLUSION

Video games are considered to be the newest form of entertainment, despite being publically available for over 38 years. Matthew Southern's analysis of video game culture accurately describes the attitude towards them when we wrote his study in 2001; but, being the fastest growing industry in the world, social convention is vastly different now than it was a decade ago. The birth of casual and social gaming has opened up the universe of video games to considerably bigger and broader audiences than previously. While there will always be an element of certain video game genres being "beneath popular culture", it is evident that video games will continue to expand its branches into more demographics. Video games are no longer played in dark sub-urban basements by the few; video games are now played by the non-gamer.

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