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March 2011

Socially Responsible Games

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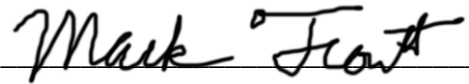
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Socially Responsible Games

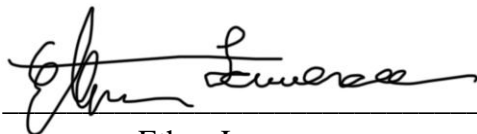
An Interactive Qualifying Project
Submitted to the Faculty
of the
WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation
by



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03/03/2011



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Abstract

This paper analyzes the ethics of producing video games with violent, militaristic, or stereotypical themes. The authors argue that video games shape the social ideologies that players hold and that the current video game industry promotes unjust ideas. The authors attempted to design a socially responsible game and analyze its ethical content. Social responsibility in video games is a difficult task due to market pressures, technological limitations, and a lack of understanding of the issue within the video game industry.

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Introduction

There is no denying that video games have become an important part of modern culture. The recent release of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* shattered records spanning the whole of entertainment media when it drew in more than \$650 million in its first five days. In a single day, more than 5.9 million multiplayer hours were logged collectively by over 2.6 million separate players (Activision).

It is commonly believed that video games are just a pastime for children. However, according to the Entertainment Software Association, “the average game player is 34 years old and has been playing games for 12 years” (ESA). Video games are a relatively new medium—only a few decades old—but their user base is vast. Given the widespread popularity and growing importance of video games, it is important to consider their social impact on the millions of players worldwide and the ways in which they affect society as a whole.

Frankfurt School philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer detail the relationship between media and society in their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written in 1944. They primarily identify radio, magazines, and films as the conveyors of mass culture, but the points they make are just as relevant today when applied to television and video games. Adorno and Horkheimer identify all media forms as playing a part in “the culture industry.” The culture industry refers to the commodification of culture itself. Media companies make a profit from generating cultural artifacts, which in turn influence and shape society. Because the media companies’ financial success is tied to the formation of society, they end up influencing the social structure in ways that suppress individual thought and maintain the interests of the current dominant establishment.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the realm of marketing. The focus of marketing is twofold. The first goal of marketers is to find out what people will buy so that they can be the

ones to offer it. The second goal of marketing is to manipulate people into wanting to buy whatever it is that the marketers have to sell. When the culture industry applies marketing techniques to its cultural artifacts, the result is a constant stream of bland and watered-down content so as to appeal to the greatest number of people as possible, and therefore make the highest number of sales as possible. However, as Adorno and Horkheimer point out, “the simple reproduction of mind does not lead to the expansion of mind” (100). This watered-down content does nothing for its consumers—it merely serves to maintain the status quo wherein the consumers continue to pay for the content that the culture industry provides.

Despite their massive impact on society, artifacts of the culture industry are not held to very high standards. Adorno and Horkheimer explain that “Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors’ incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products” (95). The massive amounts of money made by the culture industry are used as a justification for the product’s lack of artistic value. The problem with this argument is that it puts the financial value of a product over its social value. Or, to put it another way, it places the value of money over the value of people.

It is easy to dismiss the artifacts of the culture industry as mere entertainment, but it would be a mistake to underestimate the power of entertainment. According to Johanna Blakley, Deputy Director of the Norman Lear Center, a media-focused think-tank at the University of Southern California, “research has shown over and over again that entertainment and play have a huge impact on people’s lives; for instance, on their political beliefs, and on their health. So if you have any interest in understanding the world, looking at how people amuse themselves is a

really good way to start” (“Social Media and the End of Gender”). Just because someone is spending time in leisure does not mean that he or she is immune to ideological influence. In fact, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, one cannot be entertained by something without agreeing with its ideology (115). They define amusement as a form of escape, “but not, as it claims, escape from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality. The liberation which amusement promises is from thinking as negation” (116). Entertainment is only entertaining if the viewer is able to hand over his or her free will for a while and consent to believing whatever he or she is told.

Through the repetition of example, the culture industry programs people to hold certain beliefs. These beliefs seem to be truth if for no other reason than that all other media assert that it is true. Adorno and Horkheimer write, “For the consumer there is nothing left to classify, since the classification has already been preempted by the schematism of production” (Horkheimer and Adorno 98). With television, this comes in the form of news that only informs viewers on the things it deems are important in the world, and programs that define normal behavior through the actions of the characters. There is no longer any need for individual thought—all that anyone needs to know about the world has already been discovered, explained, and neatly packaged into some sort of cultural artifact produced by the culture industry. When people willingly give up their ability to create, classify, and learn they are giving the content-creators control of their viewpoints. By giving up their capacity for autonomous thought, they are essentially handing control of their lives over to an industry whose interests are purely self-serving.

The primary reason for the culture industry’s current longevity is that it is self-justifying and self-sustaining. “The ability to keep going at all becomes the justification for the blind continuation of the system, indeed, for its immutability” (Adorno and Horkheimer 119). The fact

that something is repeated does not imply that it is healthy. The culture industry is just as capable of perpetuating unethical ideals as it is ethical ideals. Change can never be made if one is unwilling to step outside of the system and evaluate it at face value.

The products of the culture industry are generally accepted by the public without question—such is the nature of mindless escapism—but that does not mean that the public will accept everything that is sold to them. New media frequently test the boundaries of sensibility until they attract enough attention to be sanctioned by some sort of governing body. The governing body is usually an agent from within the culture industry itself; this way it is able to maintain control over the system even if it is forced to self-regulate. For example, excessive gore and frequent provocative art in comic books sparked the formation of the Comic Book Code of 1954, which regulated everything from depictions of violence and nudity to the portrayal of criminals and illicit relationships (Comics Magazine Association of America). A similar list of restrictions, the Hays Code, was created for Hollywood films almost a quarter century earlier. Video games, too, have a code maintained and enforced by the Entertainment Software and Ratings Board. At the time of this writing, the United States Supreme Court is expected to rule on the case of *Schwarzenegger v. Entertainment Merchants Association* over whether or not a California law banning the sale of video games rated “for mature players only” to minors is constitutional (Lang, “Violent Video Game Child Ban”).

This paper will analyze ideological trends in the current video game industry and the areas in which they fail to support ethically sound institutions and modes of behavior. As a part of the culture industry, video games are partially responsible for forming the society that shapes the way people live their lives. Because the culture industry’s cycle of control and profit is self-perpetuating, it is only after identifying the cycle that anyone can break free of it. Given the

influence that cultural artifacts have on social structure, video game developers are morally obligated to consider the potential ramifications of their creations and to make games for the betterment of society.

Interactivity and Choice in Games

The factor that separates video games from most of today's popular media is the interactivity that they claim to offer. In books and movies, the reader or viewer is given a single narrative driven solely by the design of the creator. In video games, the player drives the action, pulls the triggers, and explores a virtual, interactive world. In many ways, the player feels like he or she is controlling the story, given full range to act as he or she pleases to shape the narrative.

However, the interactivity of video games is mostly an illusion. It may appear that the player has control over the story and the world around them, but they are completely restricted to the design decisions made by the game's development team. The player's interactions with a game are defined by the affordances that the designers build in. Affordances are the actions that players can take within a game. In this sense, playing a video game could be likened to exploring a book in 3D space or controlling the camera movements in a movie. As Charles Bernstein states in his essay "Play it Again, Pac Man,"

If films offer voyeuristic pleasures, video games provide vicarious thrills. You're not peeking into a world in which you can't be seen, you're acting in a world by means of tokens, designated hitters, color-coded dummies, polymorphous stand-ins. The much admired interactiveness of video games amounts to less than it might appear given the circumscribed control players have over their men. Joy sticks and buttons (like keyboards or mice) allow for a series of binary operations; even the most complex games allow for only a highly limited amount of player control (Bernstein).

Sandbox games—wherein the player has the ability to move freely throughout a large world—may seem open-ended, but the options the player has to interact with the world are severely limited. The only affordances programmed into these types of games generally involve

running around creating havoc, often in the most violent way possible. The story merely frames the player's violent behavior with a weak context in an attempt to justify it. The developers of games like *Grand Theft Auto*, *Red Faction: Guerilla*, or *Just Cause* claim that their worlds are varied and interesting, each offering a new and exciting experience. However, in each of these games, the player has a very limited set of options: travel around the map in an entertaining way, cause property damage, and kill people. While linear games are able to offer a more elaborate story, the core mechanic – the actual interactivity – is still almost always limited to “perform action X” or “kill enemy Y,” and the story will not move on until the events are triggered.

Video games are beginning to attempt to include the concept of morality. Many games offer a series of moral choices throughout the game. In the *Bioshock* series, for example, the player has the option of either saving little girls—called “little sisters”—who have been turned into monsters, or simply killing them and harvesting their energy. This is an attempt to build ethical decisions into the game, but in the end it falls flat. The affordances that the game allows are all primarily violent ones—whether the player saves or kills the little sisters, the gameplay still consists of running around a world shooting people. These “moral” decisions are a façade; they allow the player to feel that their choices affect the game, even though they have little to no real impact.

Another series that makes a more in-depth attempt at including ethical decisions is *Fable*. In fact, the tagline for *Fable II* is “Who will you become?” Even though at face value they may seem to have depth, the moral decisions that the player can make change the story on only a surface level, and lack any convincing consequences.

In *Fable III*, the player rules over a kingdom. The player must make a series of decisions – good or evil – to help their kingdom. All the good choices leave the player bankrupt and unable

to defend his or her kingdom, causing the deaths of thousands. The “evil” options allow the player to profit from the misery of their people, while sparing their lives. Initially, this sounds like it should make a huge difference, but in essence the game plays the same either way. In another instance, the player is asked whether to execute the former King – an evil man who betrayed the Hero at multiple points in the game. He offers a bribe – the strength of his loyal army, and a non-player character pleads the case for execution. If the player chooses to save him, the troops never appear, rendering the decision entirely useless, aside from filling or draining a so-called morality bar.

Aside from these impacts on the story, the other effects of the player's morality manifest themselves in superficial ways. Depending on the player's alignment, non-player characters will react differently to their presence. If the player is evil, the villagers often run away, or if the player chooses to be good, townspeople cheer as the hero walks by. The non-playable characters have no impact on the story or game, so even this manifestation of the morality is superficial. The most noticeable effect of the player's morality is the change of appearance in the avatar. It is transformed from a beautiful human into a hideous, horned beast.



Moral decisions in *Fable II* primarily affect the protagonist's appearance.
<http://www.gamesradar.com/f/faces-of-good-and-evil-in-fable-ii/a-2008101716503450016>

The *Fable* franchise is offered as a scapegoat because it is the epitome of everything wrong with choice in games. It proudly touts its innovative and complex morality systems, when it is clear there are none. Every game on the market making similar claims suffers from the same deficiency, offering faux choices that have no real effect whatsoever.

When games provide the façade of choice, they conceal the fact that players are being pigeonholed into making certain decisions. This does not imply misuse, but adds to the need for forethought during creation. A quote from the book *Digital Play* explains the situation well: “Our argument is not that multimedia systems are intrinsically oppressive, vacuous, or malign. It is rather that their potential is being narrowed and channeled in ways that betray their promise, even as that potential is promoted with the rhetoric of choice, interactivity, and empowerment” (Kline, Peuter, and Dyer-Witthford 22).

The Power of Virtual Reality

Games and virtual reality can have a profound effect on the player, across a spectrum of applications. Virtual reality is now widely used to simulate real world experiences in order to train and heal, and its effects have been proven time and time again.

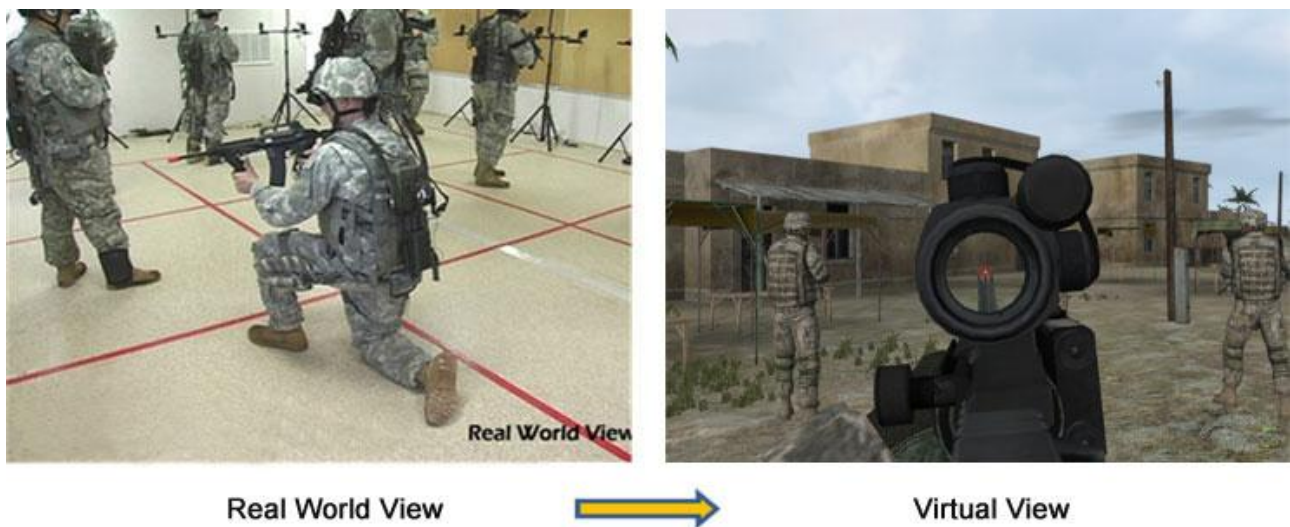


Military-grade virtual reality contains many sensors to provide as realistic an experience as possible.

http://www.quantum3d.com/solutions/immersive/expedition_di.html

Governments worldwide are convinced of the power of virtual reality. In 2009, 8.4 billion dollars were invested in military simulation training (Marketresearch.com), creating an ever-expanding arsenal of effective soldier-training machines. Government uses of virtual reality range from field medic training to combat vehicle simulations (both in air and on the ground) to

training soldier's reflexes for armed combat. Some of these simulations are turned into fully immersive virtual reality. Quantum3D is a company specializing in military VR. The technology requires that a soldier wear a number of trackers and sensors, so that their virtual persona will mirror the soldier's action in the simulation. Replicating a real-world scenario in a virtual environment with such precision not only helps to desensitize the soldier to the feeling of pointing a gun at a fellow human being, but also trains their muscle memory and reflexes to react without the need to think.



Virtual reality combines a real-world tactile experience with a digital simulation to provide an immersive world.
http://www.quantum3d.com/solutions/immersive/expedition_di.html

One of the most popular types of virtual reality is vehicle simulations, most noticeably flight simulators. They have been used to train pilots (both military and civilian) for almost a century. However, have been even more remarkable applications of this technology. With the proper peripherals, civilian games can train their players. Greger Huttu, one of the world's top players in a virtual car racing game called *iRacer*, was able to demonstrate the power of virtual simulations when racing show *Top Gear* contacted him. After proving his mettle in the game, the show placed him in a real Mazda racer and sent him around the track. On his first lap, *Top Gear*

reported: “His braking points are spot on. He's firm and precise on the throttle. And in the fastest corner, he's entering at 100mph compared to an experienced driver's 110 - a sign of absolute confidence and natural feel for grip... Then, on lap four, he pops in a 1:24.8, just three seconds off a solid time around here.” (Read)

One of virtual reality's most positive and profound uses is its ability to heal certain mental disorders. The process is called Virtual Reality Therapy, and it works like exposure therapy in traditional psychology. Virtual Reality Therapy has proven effective at curing patients of a number of disorders, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, phobias, anxiety disorders, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. *FearFighter* is a proven treatment which combines a strict virtual exposure therapy regimen with person-to-person discussion over the phone each week. The treatment has had extremely positive results; “FearFighter has undergone extensive testing and trial pilots involving 700 patients and has received an endorsement by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence as being proven to be clinically effective as well as cost effective” (FearFighter).

Virtual reality simulators are always designed with an express purpose. This limited scope allows the creator to develop a focused program as a means to a very specific end. Video games fall under a similar but decidedly different realm of interactive media. Video games are not designed to train or condition, but to create an interesting or challenging experience for the player to enjoy.

Playing a video game is accomplished with joysticks and buttons; most video game controllers do not resemble those used in military simulators. The player of a realistic war game may develop knowledge about certain guns, but the game will not teach them how to operate and fire one in “real life.” Virtual simulation uses extremely accurate replicas of real-world objects as

peripherals. The use of these as controllers trains muscle memory to react with similar objects in the real world. However, if a military FPS trades its controller for a realistic gun peripheral and motion control, the player's experience would be completely different. It would begin training their muscle memory to react to enemy fire. The realism would not be spot on, but the general effects would mimic those of military virtual reality simulators.

With such striking similarities between the mediums, it is not hard to believe that video games could have inadvertent effects on their players. As game philosopher Simon Penny states:

Computer simulated immersive environments are clearly an effective tool for bodily training, demonstrated by their use in civil aviation and in the military. Over the last decade, applications have broadened, VR simulations have even been applied to psychotherapy. Such simulations create a useful environment for desensitizing phobic patients who transfer what they've learned in the "simulated" world to the "real" world, allowing them to ride elevators and cross high bridges. So, while the electronic game industry vehemently counters claims that interactive electronic games have any real life consequences, psychotherapists employ simulation technologies precisely because they have effect in people's lives (Penny 73-84)

Social Irresponsibility in Video Games

Assuming video games can affect players, it is important to discuss exactly what their effects are. Unfortunately, few video games are designed with social ramifications in mind. This leads to the popular video game industry embracing several stereotypes that promote ideals contrary to a fair and equitable society. The next few sections of this paper will examine the ethical consequences of some popular themes throughout video games.

It is important to note that none of these themes are exclusive to video games. In fact, many—if not all—of them started in other forms of media and have been assimilated into popular video game culture from the larger overall culture. The whole of media production is equally responsible for the inclusion and perpetuation of unethical themes. Other forms of media have been purposely excluded in the interest of maintaining a manageable scope.

Similarly, it is important to note that not all video games perpetuate unethical themes. The problems identified in this paper are, however, very common in the video game industry as a whole. No one video game can be blamed for single-handedly perpetuating unfair social structures; this effect only becomes apparent when all video games are looked at in aggregate and the common themes are traced between them.

Gender Roles

Most video games involve the player taking control of one or more characters and guiding them through a narrative predefined by the game developer. These characters may be humans, robots, anthropomorphic animals, or amorphous blobs, but no matter what physical *shape* the character comes in, they all have distinct personalities. Androgynous characters are rare. Even amorphous or robot characters, for whom the term “sex” is meaningless and undefined, tend to have clearly masculine or feminine genders. As such, nearly all video game characters can be considered gendered entities.

It is important to note that “gender” and “sex,” while often used interchangeably, do not refer to the same idea. Sex, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is defined as “... female or male especially on the basis of their reproductive organs and structures,” while gender is defined as “the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex.” Sex is biological, referring to one’s physical form, and is fixed at birth. Gender, however, is psychological, and is shaped by the culture that one is exposed to.

Depictions of video game characters as gendered entities have the potential to shape players’ understanding of gender roles. The relationships between characters in the game and the potential ways in which the player can change those relationships inevitably suggest an ideology that defines “normal” masculine and feminine behaviors. This ideology often manifests in the form of gender role stereotypes. Stereotypes can have a profound influence not only on the way we as human beings see others, but also the ways in which we see ourselves (S. Swan and R. S. Wyer 1265, L. A. Rudman A. G. Greenwald, and D. E. McGhee 1164). As such, by influencing perceptions on gender stereotypes, video games have the potential to shape the way players live their lives.

Womanhood through the Lens of Video Games

Western culture constitutes a patriarchal society. The very nature of modern gender stereotypes creates a society in which women are encouraged to remain passive and dependent on the decisions and actions of men. Despite the tremendous advances that have been made since the start of the women's rights movement, women still earn less money than men do at comparable jobs (Fitzpatrick). Even though women in the United States are permitted to pursue any field that interests them, they still tend to shy away from science, technology, and mathematics (Diekman et al.). They usually find their place among the humanities and social sciences. As noted by feminist writer Kate Millett in her book, *Sexual Politics*, the sciences are where "the balance of employment, prestige, and reward at present lie" (42). Millett goes on to argue that the reasons for the lack of women in these prestigious positions in society is not from any sort of biological hard-wiring, but rather from a system of anthropological, social, and psychological precedents that define what constitutes feminine traits.

This patriarchal society, as with so many elements of culture, is self-perpetuating and self-justifying. Patriarchy is not something that is merely imposed by men upon an unwilling female population. In fact, as Millett puts it, "women are characteristically harsh, ruthless, and frightened in their censure of aberration among their numbers" (56). Women as well as men are indoctrinated by the system, believing that modern concepts of femininity and masculinity must reflect the truth simply because they have held for so long (Millett 58).

Gender stereotypes are constantly reiterated through media, including video games, under the guise of "realism." The problem is that by repeating these stereotypes—even if they do initially seem to reflect the current reality—the media ends up reinforcing an unjust social structure. The true driving force behind video games' use of stereotypical content is economic.

Stereotypes are used as a method by which video games can be made easily marketable to as wide a number of people as possible. Stereotypes are, by their very nature, already tried-and-true character templates whose effectiveness has already been proven. Because video games are a commercial venture, it is safer to include stereotyped characters than to try to develop more dynamic and thoughtful characters. In the words of Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry “rejects anything untried as a risk” and the repetitive themes in media “represent the average of late liberal taste imposed threateningly as a norm” (107).

Women are distinctly underrepresented in video games. Even though women constitute approximately half of the population, a recent content-analysis on the 19 most popular games of 2006 found that none of the main characters were female, with only 40% of the supporting characters being female (Mou and Peng 927). A similar study on video game magazine advertisements found that only about one quarter of the characters depicted were female (Dill and Thill 858). This underrepresentation of women in video games has two effects. It serves to de-normalize femininity, and it exaggerates the stereotypical qualities of the women that *do* appear in video games. By using men as the default character type, and leaving female characters as the “exotic” choices, masculinity is implied to be the “normal” or “active” state of a human being. Women are then described in terms of their differentiation from the norm—a function, according to Millett, that is important to maintain a patriarchal system. “Were it not,” Millet argues, “one might as plausibly speak of ‘feminine’ behavior as active, and ‘masculine’ behavior as hyperactive or hyperaggressive” (32).

The underrepresentation of women in video games also leads to an amplified impact of the qualities of the women that do appear on gender stereotypes, such that a large and diverse population ends up being represented—and therefore characterized—by only a small sample of

female characters. This amplification could have a positive effect if women in video games were portrayed in active or leadership roles; unfortunately this is almost never the case. One of the aforementioned video game content-analyses found that “females were more likely to be in the supporting role position than males.... In addition females were more likely to be portrayed as the rescued” (Mou and Peng 927).

Women in video games are frequently portrayed in passive roles. Rather than being the agents of the story whose actions save the world, they play a secondary role by providing the male characters with the resources (or the impetus, in the case of “the rescued”) that they need to enact change on the world. The value of women in video games is not in their ability to overcome obstacles and lead their team to victory, but in the services they provide to the men in the story that instead allow *them* to accomplish these goals. This portrayal of women reinforces the patriarchal ideals that control should be left to the men, and that the role of women is merely to serve men.

Not only are these ideals upheld in most traditional video games marketed at males, but the video games that are marketed directly towards females (typically children) reinforce these gender stereotypes as well. *Barbie Fashion Designer* was a video game created by Mattel in the 1990s as an attempt to reach the “untapped market” of girls in the video game industry. The game was commercially successful, and several other “girls’ games” appeared on the market thereafter. The problem with these girls’ games is that they represent the very early indoctrination of girls into gender stereotypes that reinforce a patriarchal system. Philosophy and gender professors Suzanne de Castell and Mary Bryson liken them to “feminized playthings that escort girls to their proper place in the gender order” (232). Girls’ games provide only a limited palette of activities from which girls can choose, restricting “imaginative experience to what

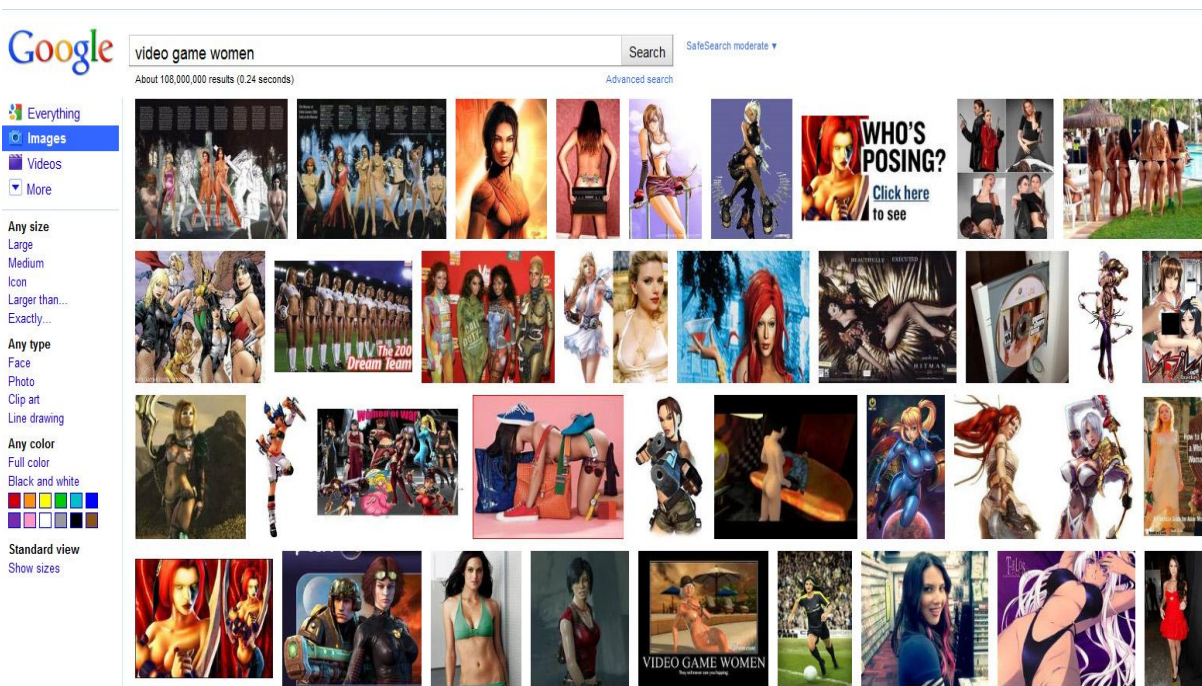
adults perceived as its ‘proper place’” (Jenkins 262). The content of girls’ games often puts girls in the role of a teacher or healer—once again supporting roles—and rarely in the shoes of an active agent of change or leader. This prepares young girls to accept their secondary position in a patriarchal society.

Game companies sometimes overtly point to market conditions as their justification for the inclusion of stereotypical content. Publishers frequently conduct extensive focus testing to determine what it is the public wants, and how they should best go about making their money. However, the research and testing methodologies that they use are problematic. Marsha Kinder, a professor of critical studies at the University of California specializing in children’s media theory points out that instead of measuring what girls like or want to see in video games, focus testing actually demonstrates “how effectively kids have absorbed these social binaries of gender” (226). By reproducing these stereotypes and then marketing them to girls, video games end up reaffirming them and increasing the gender gap between men and women (Brunner, Bennett and Honey 81).

This method of teaching gender stereotypes to girls is effective. A study wherein several middle school age girls were asked to develop games found that 58% of the games contained themes that reinforced existing gender stereotypes (Denner, Bean, and Werner 7). In order for a patriarchal society to persist, it needs to be accepted by both the men in control and the women being subjugated. Video games play a part in this system when they play off of gender stereotypes in an attempt to sell video games to “the female market.”

Of all of the problems with gender representations in video games, by far the most rampant is the portrayal of women as sex objects. One simply needs to do an image search for “video game women” on any search engine: the vast majority of the results depict women (either

video game characters, or real women playing video games) in various states of undress, often in sexual poses.



A Google search for "video game women" turns up numerous sexual results, even when mature content filtering is applied.
<http://images.google.com>

Female video game characters are frequently portrayed in revealing clothing, and are overwhelmingly depicted with unrealistic body proportions—that is, large breasts, long legs, and a small waist—consistent with an idealized version of the male concept of female beauty (Mou and Peng, Dill and Thill). The problem with this depiction is that it reduces women to the level of objects; their existence and value in a video game is only to be the subjects of heterosexual male lust. Any value such a character might have had as an autonomous agent is completely overshadowed by her sex appeal.

Along with the idea that women are sexual objects for the gratification of men, video games also reinforce what feminist Thomas Macaulay Millar calls the “commodity model of sex.” The basic premise of the idea is that sex is viewed not as an act, but as a commodity that

women have and men try to get. Under the commodity model of sex, “women are livestock, valued for what they provide, not as partners” (Millar 31). Video games can take the commodity model of sex to a whole new level by literally making sex one of the many commodities a player can take advantage of during the course of a game.

In the popular *Grand Theft Auto* series of games, having sex with a prostitute restores health to the player. A press release for *Alpha Protocol* boasts that the main character “can ‘get’ all of the game’s women if he wanted to” (John). Many games, including *Alpha Protocol*, keep track of sexual encounters as achievements, which often register as badges of honor that players can display on their personal gamer profile. These are just a few examples of video games fully embracing the commodity model of sex, and in turn, embracing a patriarchal view on the role of women.

Video games enforce a patriarchal society wherein women are encouraged to remain passive. The value of women is defined not by their individual qualities as agents, but through the services that they provide for men. The female body is frequently used as an object for male sexual gratification, which objectifies and disrespects women.

Manhood through the Lens of Video Games

Video games do not speak solely about womanhood—they also carry embedded messages about the nature of manhood. Feminist Tony Porter explains that as a boy, he was “taught that men had to be tough, had to be strong, had to be courageous, dominating, no pain, no emotions (with the exception of anger) and definitely no fear” (“A Call to Men”). These qualities perfectly describe the vast majority of video game males. Masculine video game characters solve their problems through violence, shooting first and asking questions later. Any unwillingness to strike out is coded as weakness or cowardice, and is therefore characterized as

being unmanly. Male video game characters tend to have an uncaring and hostile attitude, and use swearing to show it. They also model poor attitudes towards women, normalizing the treatment of women as sex objects as a way of proving one's manhood. All of these behaviors portray a combative and even dangerous image of masculinity that robs men of their ability to form close relationships and enables men to abuse those around them—especially women.

The most prominent and destructive trait that video games code as masculine is an affinity for violence. The vast majority of video game males are aggressive in nature (Dill and Thill), and the use of violence is such a key feature of most games that few male protagonists escape its use. Many male protagonists are soldiers, such as in the popular *Call of Duty* or *Gears of War* franchises, and a violent nature is a common and even expected feature from them. Violence is not limited to what would typically be considered violent professions, however. In the *Half Life* series of games, the player takes control of a scientist who deals with an alien attack not with his intelligence, as might be expected of someone of that profession, but instead by picking up a crowbar and using it to beat the aliens to death. Violence is so universal in video games that to the average video game player, this does not even seem strange. Men are expected to use their strength to fight off any obstacles in their path.

This depiction of men as violent entities can be gruesome, as in *God of War 3*, where players are rewarded with more points for using more painful attacks, with an on-screen message lauding them for “brutal kills” and “sadistic hits.” The main character, Kratos, responds with violence to verbal taunts from the Greek god Hermes, cutting off his legs and then killing him for his insolence. This type of response, while in an extreme form, is common for male video game characters who are willing to start fist fights over insults. In fact, an unwillingness to fight is often met with accusations of cowardice, or with the statement “I thought you were a man.”

These sorts of situations common to video games create a society in which men are not expected to curb their anger, and violence is seen as a normal masculine response to problems.

Video games also send the message that men are supposed to act cockily and disrespectfully towards others. A man who is seen as a “bad-ass” is treated with respect, as can be seen from the many video game blogs that sing their praises (Inzauto). Male video game characters often prove their bad attitudes through the use of swearing, which is prevalent in many Teen- and Mature-rated games, and is even appearing in games intended for younger audiences, such as *Sonic Adventure 2: Battle*, which is rated as appropriate for Everyone 10 and Older. These bad attitudes are rarely shown as having any sort of negative consequences. Even in games like the *Mass Effect* series, where the player gets to choose the protagonist’s dialogue, there is often little effect from picking disrespectful dialog. Allied characters may speak of their distaste for the comment, but ultimately they will continue to assist the protagonist regardless of whether or not the player verbally abuses them. This portrayal of men justifies antisocial behavior, creating an incongruent world where verbal abuse is expected to foster respect instead of damaging relationships.

Perhaps most troubling about video game representations of manhood, however, are the ways in which video games portray the male’s role in a heterosexual romantic relationship. Not only are women treated as sex objects in video games, but a character’s manhood is in question if he does not want to uphold this tenet of patriarchy. In *Assassin’s Creed 2*, one of the first missions the player is asked to undertake is to guide the protagonist Ezio di Firenze to a young woman’s window so he can seduce her and then run away from the guards after her father catches him. In *God of War 3*, the only one of the gods that protagonist Kratos does not kill is Aphrodite, goddess of love. Instead, he has sex with her while two topless maidservants look on

in jealousy. Aphrodite asks Kratos, “Do you know how long it’s been since a real man has come into my chambers?” This entanglement of using women as objects for sexual gratification with manhood is dangerous and common in video games. It normalizes the mistreatment of women and even discourages healthy relationships as being unmanly.

If women are to be regarded as objects, then they are dehumanized, which gives men internal permission to commit acts of violence against women. Modern video games are no exception to this rule. In *God of War 3*, Kratos throws Hera to the ground and snaps her neck when she chastises him for his evil deeds, in a manner startlingly reminiscent of domestic violence. *Grand Theft Auto 4* allows players to murder prostitutes after using their services in order to recover the money they spent on them. This is actually a popular enough action that many YouTube videos exist asking (and answering) the question: “How do you kill your hookers?” Even independently-developed games, often lauded by the gaming community for being more artful than commercially-produced games, can normalize violence against women. In independently-developed *Super Meat Boy*, the titular protagonist’s girlfriend is beaten by the villain at the end of every level in a manner that is intended to be comical. In the words of Sut Jhally, professor of communication, “You don’t need a PhD in cultural studies to understand that when you make this sort of abuse fun and entertaining it has the effect of normalizing, justifying, and rationalizing men’s violence against women” (“Wrestling with Manhood”).

Ultimately, the overall message that video games convey about manhood is that men should physically and verbally abuse those around them; if they do, they will be treated with respect. Real men, according to video games, do not back down from fights, never show any emotions except for anger, and treat women as sexual objects. In reality, these qualities would serve to break down vital supporting relationships in a man’s life—friendships and romantic

relationships alike—leaving him without a reliable social support network. Ironically, this collective socialization constitutes a set of rules that men are supposed to obey out of the fear of being ostracized (Porter “A Call to Men”). Video games contribute to this self-defeating image of manhood through the collective attitudes and actions of the protagonists that they choose to portray.

Responsible Gender Portrayals

Video games reinforce unjust and dangerous gender stereotypes that disempower women and rob men of their ability to form healthy relationships. When taken in aggregate, video games depict a world where men control the fate of the universe through violence and women exist as men’s sidekicks (at best) or, more commonly, little more than the objects of men’s sexual desires. These stereotypes are influenced by market conditions. Stereotypical content has been proven to sell well, so game designers rarely see the need to look beyond these proven formulas. It is likely that most game designers never even realize that their portrayal of gender roles in video games is irresponsible.

Responsible gender portrayal in video games should take on several different forms. The easiest way to do this is to stop marketing games as being either “for boys” or “for girls.” The video games industry is already addressing this issue, and gender-separated games are much less common than they used to be (Kafai et al. x). Simply marketing games as games, without attaching any obvious gender stereotypes allows consumers to be interested in games based on what types of games they truly want to play, rather than relying on the stereotypes to tell them what they’re supposed to like. Once video games cease to map themselves alongside gender

stereotypes, the people that play them will be freer from the corrupting influences of those stereotypes.

Video games also need to include more female characters. Their underrepresentation in games needs to be corrected by balancing the number of female characters with the number of male characters. In addition to quantity, the quality of female characters included in video games should be considered as well: female characters need to be included in active roles—not just supporting roles—and in ways that do not conflate their agency with sexuality. The ideal is for games to include the ability to select the gender of the protagonist. Many modern role-playing games are already starting to do this: recent games in the *Pokémon* series allow players to choose either female or male avatars. Even more complicated role-playing games such as *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age: Origins* allow for selection of either male or female protagonists with voice acting for either sex.

It is not always possible, however, for a video game to allow the player to pick the sex of the protagonist. For many games, doing so may increase the cost of production greatly, because sex-specific content will need to be generated for both protagonists all the way through the story. Other games might want to tell a specific story with particular characters for which choosing the protagonist would not make sense. In these cases, more video games need to consider including strong female protagonists without objectifying them.

Unfortunately, there are not very many games that live up to this ideal yet. More common are games like *Bayonetta*—a hack-and-slash game where the main character is a sexy witch. The titular character has all the characteristics of the traditional male agents of video games: a brutal propensity for violence, a bad attitude, and a strong sense of being in control. The one difference between *Bayonetta* and a male protagonist, however, is that she is incredibly aware of her own

sexuality—and flaunts it constantly. She wears skintight clothes, poses provocatively, and uses traditional symbols of femininity (such as lipstick and butterfly wings) as key elements of her weaponry. The problem with this character is the light in which she is portrayed: even though she is technically an agent in the game itself, she is still regarded as a sex object with regard to her femininity. This mentality is revealed through the words of Bayonetta’s creator, Hideki Kamiya on how he came up with the idea for using a female protagonist: “The reason I came up with this is that I think it’s exciting, something very interesting to see, because I’ve never seen anything like that before; a cool female character doing something cool... I looked around and figured out that, ‘Oh, maybe this is new. Maybe people haven’t done this in the past -- like, using an animal as a main character’” (“Bayonetta Developer Interview”). Bayonetta was never designed to be an empowering female character; *Bayonetta*’s thoughtless design merely makes femininity appear abnormal.



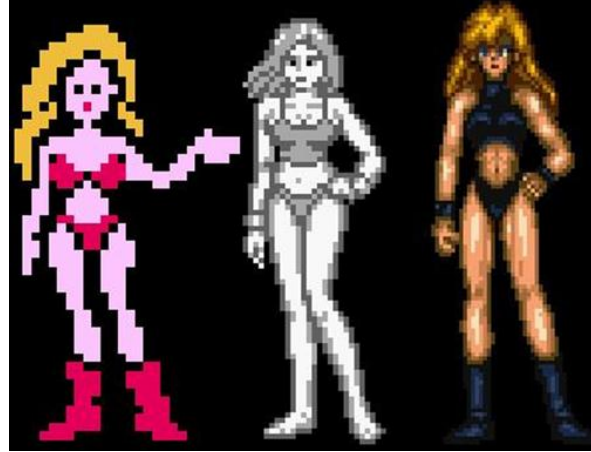
The Japanese box art for Bayonetta demonstrates the protagonist's role as a sex object.
<http://trueslant.com/tassi/2010/01/12/heavy-rain-seduces-americans-with-its-box-art/>

A slightly more positive example of a female protagonist is Lara Croft. In her original incarnation in the first *Tomb Raider* game, Lara was an attractive female character who explored tombs full of dangerous animals and traps in search of treasure. This insertion of a female character into a traditionally masculine setting helps to break down gender stereotypes about what women can and should do (Kennedy). The initial Lara Croft was clearly meant to be attractive, with unrealistic body proportions and short shorts, but it wasn't until later incarnations that she lost her agency and became the sex object that she is portrayed as today.

Another strong female character who has lost her agency in modern incarnations is Samus Aran, from the *Metroid* series of games. Samus shocked the gaming world when at the end of the first game, *Metroid*, the protagonist in the space suit was revealed to be a woman. This was an incredible step for the gaming industry at the time, and it paved the way for allowing female characters to become more commonplace. By placing a woman in the lead role, *Metroid* sent the message that women could enjoy the same agency as men without changing the outcome of the storyline. Samus' iconic space suit is unique for a female protagonist because it is neither revealing nor provocative. Taken alone, these shape Samus into a perfect example of a strong female protagonist. However, there is one feature of the *Metroid* games that undoes any social progress made by the series: at the end of every game, if the player is able to beat the game fast enough, they are rewarded with a scene of Samus in a skimpy outfit. Were it not for this one feature, Samus' image as a strong female character would be preserved, but as it stands, by providing Samus' body as a prize for skillful playing of the game, they turn her into an object to be looked at rather than a person to be respected for her achievements.



Samus' space suit is not sexual in nature.
https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/File:Metroidprime3_1.png



Any agency Samus had is ruined by the "reward" scenes players see if they play each of the games fast enough.
<http://blog.gamefreaks.co.nz/post/1044323913/samus-bikini>

Even strong female characters who are not presented as sex objects in modern video games have problems with their representation. Alyx Vance from *Half Life 2* is one such character. Even though she dresses modestly and represents a skilled female character instrumental in the fight against the alien invasion, Alyx ends up playing the role of the rescued character in episode two of the series. She is injured by an alien attacker, and it is up to the male protagonist to find a way to save her. This has the adverse effect of suggesting that even strong women are weaker than men, and that it is the role of men to protect women.

A more well-rounded representation of a female character is Faith from the game *Mirror's Edge*. Faith is an Asian woman tasked with running across rooftops, performing incredible feats of acrobatics in order to deliver messages from one location to another. The game has a strong sense of adventure, and Faith is never treated as a sex object. In fact, the portrayal of Faith as a nonsexual strong female character bothered some male fans so much that the fans attempted to redesign her with bigger breasts and rounder eyes (Ashcraft). This discomfort actually reveals Faith's success in providing a female character as an agent instead of an object, because fans had to redesign her before she became a suitable object for their fantasies. As such, Faith represents a step forward in designing empowering female protagonists.



The original Faith.



Faith as redesigned by fans.

Perhaps the most responsibly designed female protagonist in modern video games, however, is Chell from the game *Portal*. Unlike Faith from *Mirror's Edge*, Chell does not appear on the box for *Portal* at all. Instead, the player is simply thrust into a first-person view with no presuppositions as to who the main character might be. The fact that Chell is female is never played up throughout the course of the game—she does not make feminine grunting noises when she's hit, effeminate hands do not float in front of the screen, and she is never heard speaking. There is no “big reveal” of Chell's sex at the end of the game like in *Metroid*. Unlike most other games with a female protagonist, Chell is not treated as

being an exotic or unique character for being female; she's just a normal character. This works wonders for breaking down gender stereotypes. Because Chell's femininity is never emphasized or made apparent, no gender stereotypes need be applied. The way *Portal* handles its female protagonist serves to normalize femininity in an industry where masculinity is the norm.

The video game industry needs to treat both the male and female bodies with respect. Characters can be attractive, but they should not be sexualized. In the book, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, a female gamer sums up the concept very well:

One of the counterarguments I have heard many times is that characters for guys are ideal, most times unnatural or near impossible-to-achieve body images, and that it should be no different for girls. I agree completely. I don't think I would want to play a homely looking three-hundred-pound female any more than I would want to play a 105 pound blond with enormous breasts. The point of contention here is deciding whose ideal body image it is. Most male characters that fit this ideal body image are based on the body image that is ideal to a lot of guys, not girls.... The same goes for most, though not all, female characters. They are the man's ideal image of a girl, not a girl's ideal image of a girl. ("Voices from the Combat Zone" 340)

The problem is not idealized body types—to a reasonable extent, fantasy games are meant to be played as someone you'd like to pretend to be—but the problem lies in the purpose of the idealization. If the character is meant to be viewed as a sexual object, then it simply serves to reinforce unjust stereotypes. Characters should be modeled in such a way that they can be seen as respectable, rather than merely as sexual.

The video games industry as a whole needs to include a wider variety of characters. Rather than relying on a few trite stereotypes, dynamic and interesting characters should not fit

easily into purely masculine or purely feminine gender boxes. More male characters are needed who display a wide spectrum of emotions and have no interest in fighting, while more female characters are needed who take charge of a situation and are able to lead their team to victory. The goal is not to make the two genders the same, but rather to “fracture and fragment and disperse difference/s” (Bryson and De Castell 254). By including more diverse character types, video games could be used to fight the patriarchal ideologies currently perpetuated by the system, freeing men and women both (Porter “A Call to Men”).

If gender constraints were removed from video games, they could actually become a medium for challenging gender roles. According to gender researchers Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter, “the anonymity of virtual game spaces provides the opportunity [for females] to compete against male opponents free from the markers of gender, reducing stereotypical behavior towards female gamers” (250). This ability of women to compete with males free from gender constraints can build confidence in a woman’s ability to “compete on a socially equal basis with male gamers” (250). In this way, video games free of gender stereotyping provide a platform for breaking down patriarchy and socially empowering women.

Violence

Almost every video game on the market has some form of violence. There are obvious targets: *Grand Theft Auto*, where the player can kill prostitutes and run over innocent people on the street; *God of War*, where the player engages in extremely detailed scenes of explicit, gory violence; or *Postal*, which allows the player to urinate on the dismembered bodies of their victims. There is also an entirely different category of violence, deemed “okay” for everyone. Parents let their children play these games, and many people never even consider the fact that they are violent. Take, for example, *Mario*, where the player traverses a world, stomping on enemies. In *Pokémon*, the player pits monsters against each other in battles for fun. From the inclusion of such violence in nearly every game on the market, it is clear that violence is an important aspect of the industry. What effect does it have on the players and on society?

Effects of Violent Video Games

Ever since video games were introduced and became a popular form of entertainment, there has been controversy over the effects of video game violence on players. On one side of the debate stand concerned parents, politicians, and lawyers who insist that violent video game content is harming children, making them more aggressive and violent. On the other side stand the video game companies and gamers who insist that “it’s just a game” (Joliffe "DICE Comments"). The news media publishes stories blaming the playing of violent video games for murders ranging from the Columbine massacre (M. Ward) to the murders of several police officers in small town Fayette, Alabama (Bradley “Can a Video Game Lead to Murder?”). Concern over the effects of violent video games on youth is so widespread that the Supreme

Court has heard arguments over a law in California that will attempt to ban the sales of games rated as “for mature audiences only” to minors (Lang “Violent Video Game Child Ban”).

Extensive research has been done on the topic. Many studies link the playing of violent video games with heightened aggressive behavior. One such study sought to determine the short-term effects of video game violence, rather than taking on “the big picture.” Through a number of surveys distributed to six hundred students, they determined that “adolescents who expose themselves to greater amounts of video game violence were more hostile, reported getting into arguments with teachers more frequently, were more likely to be involved in physical fights, and performed more poorly in school” (Gentile et al. 1). They maintained that specific differences would moderate the effects, most noticeably parental monitoring and the aggressive tendencies that children exhibited before playing the games. Many other studies have been done since which support these findings.

A recent meta-analysis by some of the foremost researchers on the effects of video game violence concluded through a combination of the myriad of available studies that violent video games are “a causal risk factor for increased aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, and for decreased empathy and prosocial behavior” (Anderson et al. 1). The analysis is considered by many—including Anderson himself—to be the end-all conclusive proof that violent video games can cause aggression (“Violent Video Game Play”).

Just as dangerous—and perhaps more insidious—is that violent video games may be linked to desensitization to violence. Constant exposure to violent video games may cause players to be less likely to be shocked or offended when confronted with real-world violence. Desensitization through constant exposure to violent video games may cause “decreased sympathy for the victim, increased belief that violence is normative, and decreased negative

attitudes toward violence [which] all decrease feelings of personal responsibility” (Bushman and Anderson 1). According to this theory, while desensitized gamers would not necessarily be more likely to display violent behavior towards others, they would be less likely to notice and intervene if someone else were the victim of violence nearby. There have been several studies that aimed to prove this phenomenon, by measuring subjects’ responses to staged fights (Bushman and Anderson) or by measuring various physiological indicators of anxiety—such as heart rate and galvanic skin response—whilst different types of game players were being shown video footage of real-world violence (Carnagey, Anderson and Bushman). Many of these studies conclude that there is a direct correlation between violent video game playing and desensitization to violence.

As emphatic as these researchers are about their results, there are many critics with persuasive counter-arguments. First of all, most of these studies *correlate* violent video game use with aggressive behavior or desensitization, but as any statistician will tell you, “correlation does not imply causation” (STATS.org “What Is the Difference...”). Just because there is some sort of a link between violent video games and violent or insensitive people does not mean that the violent video games caused the problem; it may be that violent people are attracted to violent video games. In addition, aggression and desensitization are complex behaviors that are difficult to codify and measure objectively. Critics of these studies also suggest that publication bias and citation bias plague highly-political issues such as video game violence, so results contrary to current political pressures either never get published, or never get cited by peers (Ferguson 74). Critics also point out that violent crimes among youth has been decreasing—not increasing—since the invention of video games. This does not imply that video games have *caused* the decrease in crime rates, but it does suggest that violent video games have not caused a

measurable increase in violent crimes among youths (Ferguson 75). Then again, still other researchers make the claim that critics of violent video game research have “a vested interest in video games, either because playing these games is an important part of their identity... or because they have been funded by the media industry” (Huesmann 180). With so many different experts saying so many different things, each with their own political leanings, how can anyone determine the validity of these studies?

Surprisingly, it does not really matter much whether the studies are valid or not. To use empirical studies as the sole deciding factor is to say that the creation and enjoyment of violent video games is unethical if and only if it can be proven that they cause players to become violent or desensitized to violence. This sort of belief represents a utilitarian or consequentialist philosophy on violent video games. While utilitarianism and consequentialism are both valid philosophies, many arguments over the morality of violent video games are stopped in a deadlock when the point is brought up that the studies are inconsistent and inconclusive. It becomes an argument over which experts are more trustworthy, and whose statistics are more accurate. For all the attention that the utilitarian and consequentialist philosophies get from the media, politicians, and game developers, they are not the only—or even the best—philosophies that can be used.

In his article entitled “Is it Wrong to Play Violent Video Games?” philosopher Matt McCormick provides an excellent anecdote to demonstrate the need for alternative philosophical models to be used to evaluate the ethics of violent video games. In the science fiction television series *Star Trek*, there exists a piece of technology called the Holodeck. The Holodeck is capable of generating holograms so convincing as to be indistinguishable from real life experiences. All of the people, objects, and environments that the characters interact with inside the Holodeck are

simulations generated by a sophisticated computer program. Given video games' constant push towards realism and immersion, the Holodeck would be capable of providing the ultimate gaming experience, so it makes an applicable analogy. Now, consider that someone were to load a program onto the Holodeck that was designed for the specific purpose of simulating pedophilia as accurately as possible and then spend a great deal of time pretending to be a pedophile, just for fun. Even if this person never goes on to harm a child in real life, most people would sense that there is still something unethical about what they do in their free time. This is not captured by the utilitarian or consequentialist philosophies, however, which assert that because no real person was harmed in the process, nothing unethical took place.

The problem with this “holo-pedophilia,” as McCormick calls it, is only captured when it is looked at through the lens of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics, based on the teachings of Aristotle, suggest that a person's mindset (which derives from his or her personal character) when decisions are made are just as important as actual actions he or she takes. Aristotle says that “the agent must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character” (31). Aristotle emphasizes the importance of the intent behind an action more than the result of the action. Immoral actions—actions that lack personal virtue—may or may not harm others, but they may still harm the character of the person performing the actions. The philosophy of virtue ethics is able to capture what is wrong with holo-pedophilia: it is damaging to the person who engages in it.

Holo-pedophilia is, of course, an exaggerated example, but it still provides insight into how the playing of violent video games can be harmful to the player. For, after all, violent video games are essentially contexts in which players can experience simulated murder for fun. They

lack the sophistication of the Holodeck, but as motion controls, weapon-shaped peripherals, and graphics technology continue to advance, the haptic experience between video games and the Holodeck will continue to draw closer. Video games and the Holodeck lie somewhere along the same continuum.

What, then, do violent video games do to one's character? Even though players acknowledge that "it's just a game" and that, as fiction, it has no basis in what the player actually believes, a recent study on violent video games suggests that video games must frame violence within some sort of moral framework that absolves the player from wrongdoing in order to be successful (Hartmann and Vorderer 94). In order to do this, video games employ several techniques such as painting the enemies' actions as being excessively evil, framing the hero's actions as being necessary to save the world, or removing the consequences for violence (Hartmann and Vorderer 100). When these "moral disengagement" cues are left out, players report enjoying the game significantly less than when they are provided (Hartmann and Vorderer 111). This suggests that players do feel the need for some sort of moral justification for the actions they simulate in games. If violence can be justified, then at least on some level, players of violent video games must believe that violence is an acceptable solution to many problems.

This acceptance of violence, on an ideological level, both influences and is influenced by society as a whole. Violent video games, as a part of the culture industry, are both artifacts revealing the content of our cultural ideology as well as influencing our societal beliefs about violence. Activist Simon Penny points out that "clearly, these games would not find a market if a larger cultural formation had not prepared the ground" (77). What can be said about the character of a culture that justifies violence and paints it as a pastime to be enjoyed? The violent video

game culture promotes the dangerous ideal that violence is acceptable—even enjoyable. Surely this is not an ideal that should be cultivated.

Steps towards a Less Violent Industry

The first step towards an industry with less violent content is the creation of games without violence as a key mechanic. A number of commercially successful games have accomplished this already, but the industry has not taken the opportunity to use them as springboards. An old Gamecube game, *Animal Crossing*, contained no violence whatsoever, and the franchise sold 16.49 million units (Japan Game Charts), which was a huge amount, especially during the time period. *Farmville*, a popular social game revolving around the creation and maintenance of a farm currently has 52 million monthly average users, far more than any commercial video game has ever sold (All Facebook). Even a few recently popular big-budget games, *Mirror's Edge* and *Portal*, revolve around characters moving through a world in creative and interesting ways. Although there is violence in these games, it is not the key mechanic or the focus of the gameplay. The video game industry needs to spend more time exploring nonviolent gameplay mechanics.

This is not to say that violence should be completely eradicated from the industry. If it must be included, it should be for a meaningful purpose. Instead of killing things as a fun mechanic, violence should be used in a meaningful way to shock and sensitize the player. One death is far more powerful than a thousand. A game called *Flower* takes this idea and uses it to create an incredibly moving experience. The player takes control of a single flower petal, blowing serenely through levels, blooming flowers and bringing life and color back into a world without it. Eventually, the game takes a rather startling turn; a number of structures grow from the ground, and if the player accidentally touches them, they shake the screen, burn the player, and a portion

of the petal trail get destroyed. These levels are incredibly visceral, and the environment both frustrates and terrifies the player. The final level of the game grants the player the power to destroy these structures and populate the final world with a dazzling display of life and beauty, revolving around taking down their former adversary. Obviously, the violence in a game revolving around flowers is different than the violence in a military game, but the simple act of having harmful figures where there had been none and then providing a resolution is far more powerful than any game using violence for fun.

At the very least, games with violent contexts should try to offer nonviolent options as viable game strategies. In a war game, instead of requiring the player to fight, a game designer might consider the ramifications of a soldier refusing to fight and offer interesting related gameplay. What happens if the player tries to surrender, or helps the enemy? Sandbox games should offer at least as many humanitarian options as they do violent ones. What is it like to play a homeless man on the street? Video games have the potential to provide personal, meaningful experiences and serve as a medium for self-exploration.

Most fundamentally, video games need to stop glorifying violence. A recent game called *Bulletstorm* prides itself on creative killing, even sporting the tagline “Kill with skill.” Every kill is labeled with a witty idiom and grants the player a number of points. *Bulletstorm* is not unique in this behavior—many games have violence-rewarding subsystems—but *Bulletstorm* provides an excellent example because the entire game is centered on this mechanic. In order for progress to be made, games need to give up the juvenile obsession with extreme violence and gore.

Unfortunately, in an industry created by and solely dependent upon money, it is imperative that the content sells. Violence is easy to create and – with simple variations – can be rehashed and sold again and again. It completely dominates the market because the content is easy to

consume. Violence is a simple solution to any problem, for both the developers and the consumers. It's a tried and true method, and as long as these games continue to post profits, it will continue.

Militarism

The United States military has always had great interest in new technology. The military expends vast resources to further the development of technology. The video game industry has, in recent years, been heavily affected by military influence. “‘Practical military objectives’, as Paul Edwards describes, ‘guided technological development down particular channels, increased its speed, and helped shape the structure of the emerging computer industry’ – and by extension, the computer game industry” (Thomson 7). Games funded by the US military have been steadily growing in number since the industry has become popular. While military entities from other countries have created their own militarized entertainment, the US military is one that leads by example.

The stereotypical view of the US military and its soldiers (at least within the US itself) is that of an organization whose mission is to spread peace and freedom to the rest of the world. Soldiers are portrayed as shining examples of what it means to be an American hero. Recruitment ads constantly tout the motto “Be All You Can Be,” to convince society that being a soldier allows a person to reach their full potential. While the outward appearances of these images are presented in a positive light and have good intentions, they completely ignore the reality of war. American foreign policy also favors military action. All this amounts to an American public that is often comfortable with war.

This mentality springs from a combination of both the military-industrial complex and entertainment industry. President Eisenhower was the first to bring up the notion of a Military-Industrial Complex, where the federal government, armed forces and private corporations intertwine in a way that the lines begin to blur (Turse). “The link between the military and the computer game industry has developed into a formalized relationship in which co-production and

co-development between the computer game industry and the military has become almost a market standard. In 1996, this relationship has become known as the ‘military-entertainment complex’” (Thomson 9). While the military and entertainment industry have always had connections with each other, after the terrorist attacks on September 11th happened, the patriotic fervor and increased support for military operations—as well as the insatiable need to be entertained—fused the two entities.

In 2001, the military used the video game *Rainbow Six: Rouge Spear* as a counter-terrorist training simulation in an urban environment (Leonard). It was successful enough that the sequel was developed under the aid of the military. In 2003, the Department of Defense spent eight million dollars to fund the development of *America’s Army*, a free to play, first person shooter that (more or less) accurately depicts modern warfare in a Middle Eastern environment. Other successful, military-funded games include *SOCOM II: U.S. Navy Seals* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* (Leonard). *America’s Army*, now on its third iteration, boasts over 200,000 registered users. It was developed as a recruitment tool and advertising technique. The game has allowed people, primarily children and teenage males, to get a taste of what it is like to be in the military.

Even when the military is not directly involved, it is still influential in the video game industry. All of the *Call of Duty* games are centered on primarily fictional military events throughout the 20th century, all featuring a US soldier as the protagonist. War has become a source of entertainment where the customer is no longer just a spectator, but is allowed to participate without any of the negative aspects, like physical harm, emotional trauma, or death. While under the impression that this is what war is like, people are much more comfortable accepting military action.

War-based video games have become an effective form of propaganda. According to Princeton University's online dictionary, propaganda is defined as "information that is spread for the purpose of promoting some cause." The nature of the standard first person military shooter allows the player to experience only one side of the fight. This inevitably perpetuates the idea that there is only one right side in a two sided conflict, and that the right side is the victorious one. Most video games are not designed to show both sides to a conflict, nor do they allow the players to see the more realistic outcomes of their decisions. Additionally, a video game does not often tell the player the reason for conflict, even when there is one. Players are merely informed of the most effective way to progress to the next level and pushed to complete goals. Just as Frank Capra's famous WWII propaganda series on America's war against the Nazis is titled *Why We Fight*, the video game genre of military shooters could be described as *How We Fight*.

Something that has happened before in military endeavors and continues to happen today is Orientalism, which is when one group of people takes an entire ethnicity and reduces it to subhuman levels for the purpose of political and economic gain. It is essentially government-sponsored racism, used to garner support for operations in foreign countries. The first large scale example of Orientalism was during the British Empire. Britain's influence expanded many continents, including parts of Asia, or "the Orient." In Edward Said's seminal text *Orientalism*, Orientalism is described as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." Orientalism is thus a "distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" (Höglund).

One example of Orientalism was during the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese people were objectified and no longer viewed as civilized. They were seen only as "others." People back

home were being told that “the others” were being contained, and that war was all right because the Vietnamese were a lower class of people.

The modern incarnation of Orientalism in Western culture is often called Neo-Orientalism, and its focus is on the Middle East and Islam. A simple example is the image evoked in today’s media when a terrorist is mentioned. The word immediately calls up a picture of a person of Middle Eastern decent wearing a cloth on his head and wielding an AK-47, maliciously crying “Infidel!” That image has been reinforced by the media over the past decade, so much so that most people feel better that the “threat” is being contained. Even with the increasing amount of information that is freely available, people still believe that this image holds true. “The Middle East remains forever a space where Americans can participate in an everlasting War on Terror” (Höglund).

Instead of working to end such vicious stereotypes, video games have aided and encouraged them. The military shooter genre has used Orientalism to make everlasting conflict acceptable to the American public. In *Call of Duty*, the enemy combatants are cruel, unrelenting, expressionless killers, whose only purpose is to disturb the innocence of the world until they are destroyed by the player. No effort is put in to the backgrounds or intentions of these characters. “...it fails to show Japanese and German forces as anything worse than villains to be swept aside by the ‘good guys’” (Matt M). Games like this put the player in the mindset that the enemy is, and always will be, evil. Therefore, they must be eradicated. In fact, war games force the player to accept this mindset if they want to continue playing. “The gamer has the option of either shooting the approaching enemy or ceasing to play” (Höglund).

People are comfortable playing violent games like this because players are fighting and killing in a world devoid of consequences.

The Middle Eastern city must be transformed from a teeming habitat into a childless and (often) womanless territory occupied primarily by terrorist guerrillas. Having thus skirted one of the crucial questions of modern warfare –collateral damage– the gamer need not hold his fire, but can engage in never-ending warfare (Höglund).

Having no consequence to their actions allows players to freely kill their “enemies” in a variety of gruesome ways. A prime example of this is a mission from *Call of Duty 4* called “Death from Above.” The player controls a turret on a military gunship, the AC-130. They are ordered to protect “friendlies” from the enemy. This takes place in a small town at night. It is populated with many terrorist guerrillas, but not a single civilian. The justification is that the town has already been devastated by warfare, but halfway through the mission, civilians drive into the town. There is no distinction between the terrorists and the citizens other than a line of instruction telling the player to cease fire. Distancing ourselves from the reality of the situation somehow makes eliminating the opposition without a single regret an acceptable action.

The game *America’s Army* is perhaps the greatest example of Orientalism. In most games, players are either expressly on one side of the conflict, or given a choice to play as the “good guys” or “bad guys.” In *America’s Army*, every player sees him or herself as the “good guy.” One of the game modes is an objective based mission, where one side attacks an area while the other side defends. However, each team sees themselves as the U.S. Army and sees the opposing team as the Middle Eastern militants. The game paints the enemy team as “others” in order to encourage the players to fight. Players are more comfortable fighting people with whom they share no cultural or national ties. People who are exposed to this may be more willing to judge and take up arms against a foreign nation. While this may seem to be a clever way to simulate training, it only aggravates the problem of Orientalism.

While Orientalism refers to the way in which a group of people views another group in order to make their actions acceptable, nationalism is the way in which a group views themselves in order to justify the choices they make. Nationalism can be described as either “the attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity” or “the actions that the members of a nation take when seeking to achieve, or sustain, self-determination” (Miscevic). Some prime examples of nationalism include the traditional fireworks on the 4th of July, the Olympic Games, and soldiers who go halfway across the globe to fight in a war in order to become the “saviors of the world.”

People will work hard to further the success of the nation they live in. Though some of their intentions may be good, the purposes behind their actions are often for the betterment of the nation they represent, which may not always be good. “The issue of nationalism points to the wider domain of problems, having to do with the treatment of ethnic and cultural differences within [a?] democratic polity, which are arguably among the most pressing problems of contemporary political theory” (Miscevic).

The concept of nationalism in video games was not an issue until recently. It was either so over the top that it was comical, most notably in the *Duke Nukem* series, or there was none at all. Only in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks and the wars in the Middle East have games started to focus enough on the narrative for the players to feel any real connection to the nation they are representing. Take, for example, games like *Call of Duty* or *Medal of Honor*. “Central to these mediated narratives is the figure of the American GI. He is typically presented as a noble hero, embracing the ideals of loyalty, honor, sacrifice, and, perhaps above all, patriotism” (Huntemann and Payne, 191). Huntemann poses the question: if the individual soldier is glorified, does that necessarily glorify war? In the context of video games, glorifying

the soldier means glorifying the actions the player takes. Though it may not inherently glorify the war, involving the player in the action and only offering the choice of “kill or be killed” cements the idea that fighting is a viable solution. With nationalism, the player feels that their choices are not only viable, but socially acceptable.

While many war-based video games focus on the role of a single soldier, some games allow the player to control an entire nation. One of the first games (and arguably the most commercially successful) to toy with the concept of a nation-wide control was Sid Meier’s *Civilization* series. Players take control of a country and spread their influence through military, cultural or diplomatic world domination. The choices players make are only in the interest of expanding their nation and “winning the world.” There is no win condition for coexisting with the others although it is possible to be technically victorious by being allies with the winning nation. Of course, if plans do not work, a player can always restart the game and try again. The choices that the players make have no long term consequence, and can therefore be made without second thoughts.

Demilitarization of the Video Game Industry

The continued existence of the Military Entertainment Complex prevents a solution to these issues from arising. For the time being, however, there are a few things that can be done to lessen the problems, mostly through raising awareness and offering alternative game choices.

Glorifying violence in video games is one thing; glorifying war is a step further. War should not be seen as a first response, but as a last resort. Showing war as a desirable thing only perpetuates a readiness to go to war at the drop of a hat. The more enjoyable it is, the greater the

chance it will become a primary option. If war becomes the only feasible solution, it is important for people to understand that there are two sides to every conflict. Instead of treating war like a game, it needs to be humanized and illustrative of how inglorious real war can be. Turning people away from war will not only decrease the number of war based video games on the market, but also encourage alternative game designs.

While most of the games mentioned can be categorized as war-games, war is rarely the only solution available. The player, however, is hardly ever presented with the other options, such as diplomacy, where players can negotiate with each other towards the goal of peaceful conflict resolution. The games in the *Civilization* series have made an attempt at offering alternative options, by providing peaceful ways to win the game, but global domination through war is still the easiest endgame solution. Raising awareness of and offering alternatives to war are the only ways to illustrate that war is not a means of entertainment and should not be taken lightly.

Social Responsibility in Video Games

The previous sections detail a few areas in which the video game industry trends towards socially irresponsible content. This paper is not exhaustive—nowhere, for example, has any mention been made of racial stereotypes in video games, despite strong evidence of their existence. It does, however, give an adequate cross-section of the current trends towards social irresponsibility in popular video games. In essence, socially irresponsible video games perpetuate the same unfair and dangerous social structures that the rest of the culture industry has been perpetuating for years.

Socially responsible game design can be defined against this backdrop of socially irresponsible design. A game is socially responsible so long as it does not promote unfair or dangerous social structures. Ideally, a responsible game should promote ideas that will fight to break down systems such as patriarchy, militarism, or the justification of violence. Socially responsible games can work to destroy the system from the inside out, tearing down the current unjust trends.

A socially responsible game need not be overt about breaking down the current system. The mere creation of a good game that does not rely on violent or stereotypical content brings the industry one step closer to a world where violence and stereotypes are no longer needed to be commercially viable.

Creating a Socially Responsible Game

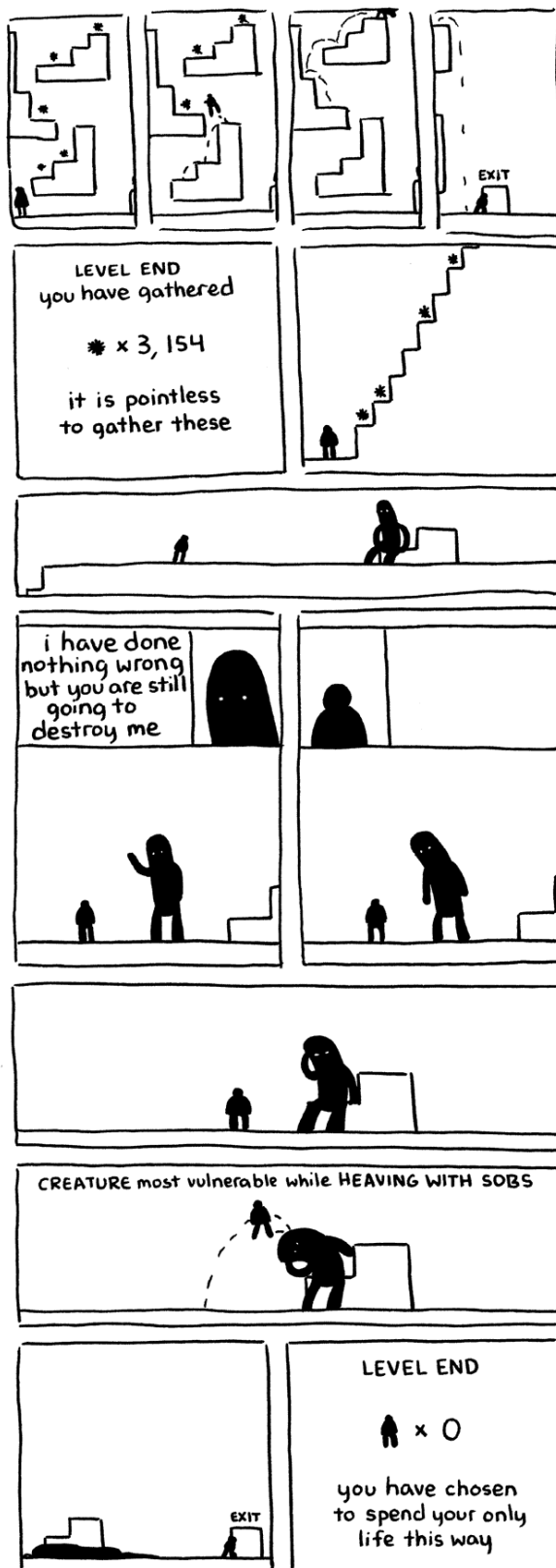
Games developed in the current industry seldom make any effort to be socially responsible. They are designed simply to sell and be fun. Little to no thought is put into the negative effects that these games could have. Game development is a costly process, and the research necessary to incorporate social responsibility into a game only adds to that cost. It is no surprise that this form of research is deemed unimportant and often pushed to the wayside.

The authors' initial goal for this project was to learn what it means to be socially responsible and to create a game that incorporated these traits. Designing the game started long before the research. After several designs, all addressing different topics of social responsibility, the final game design, *Abyme*, was chosen. During research of the topic, work on the physical game slowed to an eventual halt as the gap between and the original game design and the definition of social responsibility grew.

The game design started eleven months prior to this publication; five months before the official start of the project. During that time, the game design was constantly evolving and changing. Each concept featured a different theme, mechanic and topic of social responsibility. After many iterations, some more developed than others, the design progressed to the point where prototype development was possible.

The first game idea was a satire on 2D, side-scrolling, beat ‘em up games. It was the story of a generic character fighting his way through waves of equally brutish baddies. The game’s violence was unrealistic and cartoony. As the game progressed, the violence gradually became more realistic. At a certain point, the character starts to become self-aware, and begins defying the players input. The fourth wall quickly breaks down as the avatar makes attempts at understanding his world being turned upside down. At the end of the game, the avatar looks at the screen – to the player – and kills himself out of remorse for his actions. Because it is a game, he simply respawns, and is forced to live his life in misery.

The second game design was directly inspired by a web comic created by Jon Campbell. The moving themes conveyed in the comic were the beginnings of a perfect game. The team’s adaptation was to be fully 3D. The design evolved constantly, and prior



The Jon Campbell comic that inspired us.
<http://www.picturesforsadchildren.com/comics/0000031>

5.png

to abandonment, it told a story from the sides of both the boss creature and the player character. The player would experience the typical hero's journey, being told the entire game that he must vanquish an evil foe that has destroying the villages crops, stealing their sheep, and spoiling their water. At the end of each scene, the game's viewpoint would switch between characters. The other character's sequences would involve gathering herbs to heal his sick daughter, gathering food, being a generally nice creature, and so on. At the end of the game, the Hero character finally reaches the lauded lair of the evil monster. The doors open to reveal the gentle creature next to his dead daughter. He is gigantic, and due to the size difference between characters, the giant "boss" had unknowingly been gathering the villagers' goods, not realizing that it was harming anyone. The player is forced to kill the giant creature, or be killed. The game was intended to show the player that there is always another side to any story, especially those of violence.

The third design was inspired by the documentary *The Bridge*. The extremely moving documentary covers the story of a number of people who committed suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. The game idea was to put the players in first person perspective, immediately opening with them perched on the side of a bridge, ready to jump off. The game never got off the ground because it was too difficult to decide what would be more powerful: giving players the option to jump, or forcing them to jump, and watching the consequences unfold. The game was meant to be both an expose on the tragedy of suicide, and a triumph in the world of choice in games.

The fourth design, *Masque*, was a psychologically based game. Its main mechanic revolved around a doll-like little boy, who had to collect a number of masks from different characters in the world. The boy had been traumatized by early life events, and the game was a

representation of his attempts to confront and overcome them. It was set in a stage in his mind, and all the characters represented his different personalities and troubles. Each had a mask to represent this. Through interaction with each of the characters, he would collect their masks. Once all of them had been collected, he would leave the stage through the front entrance, signifying his acceptance and a newly-found ability to cope with the truth of his existence.

Finally, the fifth game was created. It was the first iteration of *Abyme*, the final game design. The main focus of the game was a scientist who developed a new technology, which was eventually used to destroy the world. The game encouraged the player to consider the consequences of their actions. It was a bit heavy handed, and after a major shift in the team and development process, the design was modified to create *Abyme*.

The inspiration for the final design came from a desire to send a message to the game industry. It was meant to serve as a wake up call and raise awareness about the issue of social responsibility in video games. Game designers should think responsibly about the effects of the games they create on their players. Very little has been done in this area because those who have influence in the industry consider it unimportant. Additionally, those who pursue this topic rarely gain enough leverage to have any impact.

Thus, *Abyme* was born, in an effort to counter this mode of thought. It was decided that the overall message would be conveyed in the format of a game because it would have a stronger impact on those who actually play games, as well as those for whom the message was meant. A functioning gameplay prototype was created, as well as a few art assets, but time and other problems caused the actual development to stop. The following is a complete walkthrough of the game concept.

Abyme Walkthrough

Act 1 – The Illusion

Introduction

The game opens with a sparse menu screen with the title in a plain font and the directive, “Press any key to start the game.” When a key is pressed, the screen fades to black. Ominous background music begins to play and white text appears at the top of the screen:

“You are a Scientist, on the verge of completion of your life’s work.”

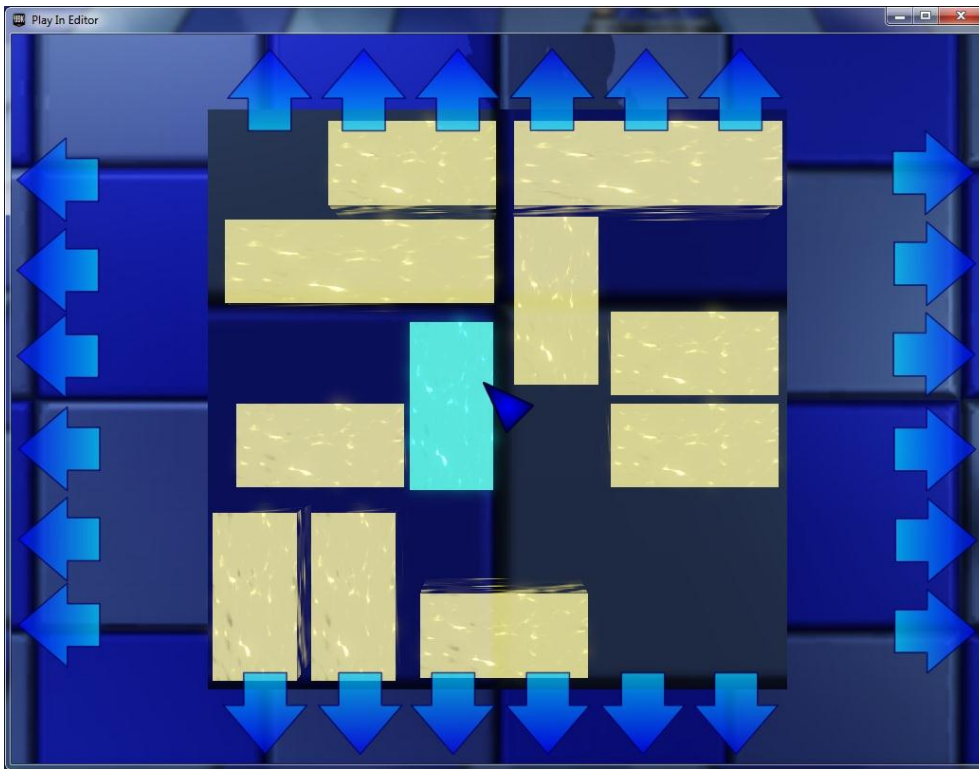
“Are you a man or a woman?”

At this point the player is presented with the option to pick between man and woman. If the player chooses “woman”, the game informs them: “Incorrect. Remember: you are a scientist,” and asks the question again. When the player chooses “man,” the text says “Correct,” and the screen fades to a male scientist in his lab. The text at the top of the screen says, “This is what a scientist looks like,” and then fades. At this point the player assumes control of the avatar.

The Lab

The game begins in the scientist’s lab. If the player attempts to leave, the scientist will remark that it is not time to depart. The player is unable to leave the room until they use the “interact” key with the big desk in the middle of the room. The camera zooms in to show that the scientist is working on some sort of device. The scientist makes some comments (to himself) about how he’s been working on this device for so long, and that it is near completion.

The device is a simple sliding block puzzle. The player uses the mouse to slide blocks around until a blue glowing block makes it through the hole on the other side of the device. A small red digital counter on the top of the device counts down from ten, decrementing each time the player move a block. If the counter reaches zero, the device buzzes and resets. The puzzle itself is not actually that hard; most people should be able to complete it in just a few tries.

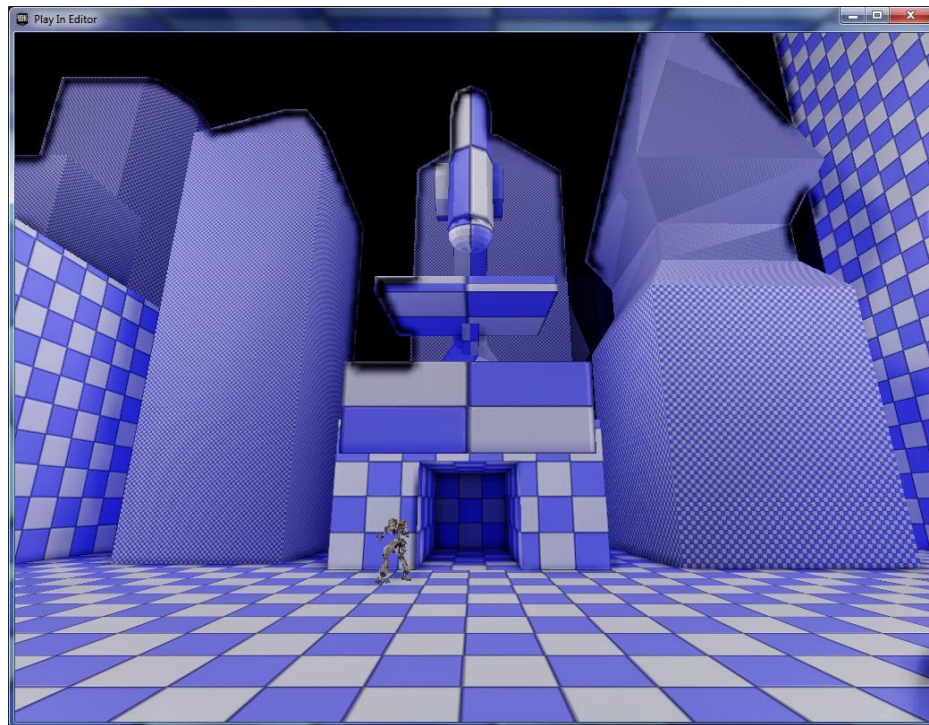


Upon completion of the puzzle, the scientist will shout “I’ve done it!” and then the camera will zoom back out to the side view of the lab again. The scientist can now move about his lab and leave the room.

Outside

From the outside of the lab, the player can see that the scientist works in a gigantic microscope, with an eye that follows him as he moves about the screen. Next to the lab is a

factory, which the scientist refuses to enter because he has no reason to be there. This area is primarily to give the player a sense of the setting—a surrealist technological city. There are people, many of them other scientists, milling about outside. The player can talk to them, and they talk about little things happening in their lives. After traveling a very short distance from the lab, the scientist reaches and enters his home.



Home

The scientist's home is simultaneously cozy but dreary. The lights are dim, and the colors are low saturation. The only room available for exploration is the living room, although there appear to be doorways that lead into a kitchen or bedroom. There is a large, plush looking chair in the center of the room, sitting on a rug. It is pointed in the direction of a large television, currently off. The player can sit in the chair, but nothing happens until the player goes over to the

television and turns it on (where it shows a blue screen) and then sits in the chair. The television begins to show a news report given by a silhouetted figure.

“We’re very glad to report that a scientist has finally invented the key to true happiness! Nobody will ever be bored again. To the scientist who invented this device: thank you! You have truly shaped the world into what it is today. All this... because of you!”

The television shuts off and will not turn back on. The player regains control of the scientist, who must walk outside again.

Outside (Ghost Town)

The location is the same as it was initially, but this time the streets are empty. Even the background music is silent. The scientist can reenter his lab, the microscope building still watching him, but there is nothing new to do there. Instead, the scientist must enter the factory.

The Factory

There are no people present; something is amiss. There is gigantic machinery in the background covered in cobwebs. There is a large lever displayed prominently on the other side of the room from where the player enters. When the player interacts with it, a banner drops from the ceiling that says “If you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you” (a quote by Friedrich Nietzsche). A trap door opens beneath the player and the player drops down.

Act 2 – The Abyss

The Worker’s Quarters

The camera cuts to a dark cave-like room where androgynous workers can be seen hammering things in the dark. A shaft of light appears, and the scientist drops down next to a worker with a different colored hard hat. After a moment of surprise, the workers all gather around the scientist and exclaim remarks about him. “Oh! He’s the one! He’s the inventor!” and “The master is here!”

An old bell hanging on the wall trills and the workers exclaim something about getting back to work and exit the screen except for one. It tells the player that it has always wanted to meet them, and that the Operator will have much to say. It then marches over to a door on the right and opens it, beckoning the scientist to go through.

The Operator

When the scientist moves through the door, it shuts with a loud bang behind him and does not open again. A voice (as dialog text on the screen) says “...you lost, kid?”

The next room is lit solely by a massive wall of television screens, some of which depict the sliding block puzzle that the player played earlier in the game, and some of which depict extreme close ups of people’s smiles. The camera starts zoomed out, to capture the impressiveness of the wall of screens, and as the player walks closer to the center of the room (where a large backlit office chair is sitting) the camera slowly zooms in. When the player is standing next to the chair, the scientist and the chair fill the screen.

Upon interacting with the chair, the Operator asks the player if he or she is familiar with the device that makes people happy. The player may answer Yes or No, and the operator explains that the device is not what it appears to be.

“Do you want to know the truth?”

The Operator makes a comment about how most people do not want to know the truth and nobody ever really thinks about it. “People know they enjoy it, and they don’t care what it’s doing to their hearts or their minds.” If the player responds that they didn’t want to know the truth, the Operator draws them back in, demanding “But you... you look familiar... wait, you’re the one who created all this! You have to know ... Go. See what your happiness looks like.” A door opens on the other side of the room and the camera zooms out so the player can see it. Tense music begins to play.

The Happy Room

The next room is filled with emaciated, twitching people, with smiles on their faces. They are all standing upright in glass pods. Their eyes and forehead are covered with a metal shield with an image of the sliding block puzzle playing on it. If the player interacts with a nearby pod, the camera zooms in for a close up. The scientist says, “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds... I didn’t want it to turn out like this!” to which the Operator replies, “Then what did you want?”

The scientist replies, “I wanted them to be happy!”

“They are happy,” responds the Operator.

“But... this... thing I created is destroying them from the inside out!”

“Yes.”

“How... how did I get here?”

“Not how,” the Operator retorts, “but why did you get here? What were you thinking?”

Act 3 – Enlightenment

A Dream within a Dream

The scientist is transported to a tunnel-like area with a strange visual effect making everything hazy. As the scientist walks to the left, he passes various key objects from the other parts of the game: the overseer’s chair, the scientist’s television, his desk from the lab. As he continues walking, he passes a gigantic telephone that begins to ring when he approaches.

If the player interacts with the telephone, a representative from Arts Electronica answers, and tells the scientist that the focus testing for the device isn’t promising enough. They ask him to increase the potency of the device.

Further along the tunnel is another phone, still very large, but significantly smaller than the first one. Like the last, it rings when the scientist is near it. If the player interacts with it, another representative from Arts Electronica responds, and offers the scientist a chance to realize his dream to make people happy by providing him with funding.

At the end of the tunnel, there is a door.

The Hill

On the other side of the door, the hazy and strange visual effects disappear. The scientist is now standing at the bottom of a grassy hill, the sun shining above. At the top of the hill is the desk from his lab, but much smaller. When the player hits the use key on the desk at the top of the hill, a boy walks up.

The boy asks the scientist about his profession and why he looks the way he does. The scientist says he created great things and tried to make many people happy, but ended up hurting them in the process. The boy is intrigued by the idea of making people happy, and ignores the scientists' pleas to think about what he's doing. The scientist begs the boy to be careful, but the boy is lost in the splendor of the new idea.

The boy enters the door on the right (the one the scientist exited from) and disappears. Control is returned to the player. Off to the left of the hill in the field is a cradle, and nothing else.

Return Home

When the player opens the door on the right again, it leads back to the scientist's living room. It is identical to the way it was earlier in the game. Like before, the player has to turn on the television and then sit in the chair. The television turns on again, and it is the same newscast as before, only this time the newscaster is revealed to be the scientist himself.

“All of this... because of you...”

Act 4 - The Truth

The screen goes dark as if to signal the end of the game. Suddenly, the blackness begins sliding upwards, and the camera enters first person perspective. The player is still in the game, but they are not the scientist. Looking around, it becomes clear that they are in the room full of people using happiness pods, and have just freed themselves from one. The game then quits without returning to the menu screen.

Retrospective Analysis

This design gives some interesting insights into both the process and the difficulties of creating socially responsible games. The game was conceived with the intent of being built on a limited time scale, so it can serve as an approximation of “real” game development. The result was moderately successful at being socially responsible, but still has much room for improvement. The process of designing *Abyrne* revealed the importance of not just thinking about being socially responsible, but also spending time getting to understand what “socially responsible” truly means. It also highlighted the difficulty in balancing gameplay mechanics with responsible design.

One of the ways in which *Abyrne* is successful is its lack of reliance on a violent game mechanic. The gameplay consists of exploring a surrealistic world and interacting with people and objects. The player is never asked to harm another character, and when it is revealed that a seemingly innocuous action made early in the game has brought great suffering to others, the intent is to jar the player into a realization of unintended cause and effect—not to glorify violence and the domination of others.

Abyrne also makes an attempt at fair gender portrayals, with limited success. The opening sequence, where the player is asked to pick a sex for the scientist and then denied the opportunity to choose a female main character is an attempt to highlight the issue of gender portrayal in video games. This trick has the potential to do just that, but it also has the potential to fall flat—especially if the player simply chooses a male protagonist. The issue is never picked up again later in the game, leaving the message at the beginning feeling detached from the rest of the game, and easily forgotten by the time the player reaches the end.

The rest of the design, for the most part, attempts to dodge gender issues with androgynous characters. None of the characters are portrayed as hypermasculine or hyperfeminine. The only blatantly gendered character is the protagonist, who is male. Whether or not the rest of the characters could truly be portrayed as androgynous remains to be seen, but it is possible that, given the context of modern video games, even if characters were genderless players would assign masculine genders to them simply because they are video game characters. In this way, *Abyrne* would contribute to the underrepresentation of women in video games. *Abyrne* makes no attempt to address militarism. This is neither good nor bad; not every game can address every issue with video games.

In retrospect, the biggest problem with *Abyrne* is perhaps its scope. It does a good job at pointing out that there is a problem within the video game industry, but makes almost no attempt at describing what the problem is or how to solve it. This is likely due to a lack of understanding on the developers' behalf of what the problem actually is—*Abyrne* was designed before the brunt of the research found in this paper was completed. As a result, the actual message of *Abyrne* is nebulous and without form. It would have been more effective if the focus of *Abyrne* were much narrower. Rather than trying to take on the whole of irresponsible game design, the game should have focused on a single aspect—such as violence or gender issues—and presented both the problem with current game designs and the solution in a responsible way.

In addition to some problems on a scale of social responsibility, *Abyrne* also has some problems relating to its gameplay value. Strictly speaking, *Abyrne* may not even be properly called a game. The player is given very few choices, and has almost no ability to affect the state of the game world. As it stands, *Abyrne* may be better described as an interactive narrative experience. Due to its simple (and fairly uninteresting) gameplay mechanic, it is unlikely that

Abyrne would be commercially viable. Creating and selling good games is difficult, and attempting to be socially responsible adds yet another layer of difficulty.

In the end, however, *Abyrne* is a step in the right direction. The very fact that care was taken to attempt to be socially responsible is important. Countless hours of precious development time were poured into trying to shape its ethical dimensions as a social artifact. The result was successful in some areas and unsuccessful in others, but a lot was learned by the designers from the process. Most importantly, *Abyrne* points out the importance of ethical research. It is not enough to simply set out to make a socially responsible game; game developers also need to spend time actually thinking about what a socially responsible game is before they will be able to successfully make one.

Conclusion

Games have a profound effect on society through the way in which they permeate our culture. While this paper primarily focuses on the roles and responsibilities of game developers, it is important to also note the responsibilities of the consumers of these products, the folks involved in the marketing of the products, and the journalists who help to mold the public's views in these matters. Singling out the developers is not to say that these other groups are excluded from responsibility but rather that developers have a greater responsibility in this regard. When the public allows games to influence and mold their thinking they place a burden on the developers that when not considered shapes societal belief in negative ways.

When games stereotype men as dominating over women, they lead to a culture of male abuse towards women. The effect on men is that they are often unable to publicly share their emotions or to escape the social pressures which dictate certain actions. When games consistently repeat the stereotypes we always hear about they validate the same stereotypes as being what reality ought to be. These ideas limit both men and women by trapping them into a frame of mind which is unwilling to consider the alternatives for fear of societal rejection. Tony Porter sums the importance of this up nicely when he says that the liberation of men is tied to the liberation of women ("A Call to Men"). In a society that is plagued with male violence and other acts of meaningless or unnecessary violence, it is a moral imperative to not feed this behavior through its glorification in games.

With male protagonists being the main option in games, and violence in games being the main mechanic, stereotypical male behavior is inevitably linked with violence. Violence in video games goes beyond stereotypes and often crosses over into the realm of the extreme. In most games, violence is the only answer to conflict of any kind, which leads to people not thinking of

peaceful alternatives to conflict. Violence is also often depicted as a grand and glorious occasion that deserves rewarding. In games, violence is not only the easy answer, but also the right answer. When players are constantly inundated with scenes depicting the benefits of violent actions, it suggests that violence in the real world is acceptable. Players of violent video games may or may not be any more or less likely to commit such violence themselves, but their willingness to find enjoyment in simulated violent acts harms their personal character.

Video games frequently scale violence up to a national setting in the form of war games. The glorification of war does not merely normalize violence as the sole means to resolve conflict but goes further to de-personalize the enemy as something less than human, which is then okay to humiliate and destroy. Throughout real history, even when only looking at the past few centuries, such mindsets have led to terrible acts of cruelty that has destroyed countless lives. These mindsets led to the Germans slaughtering Jews, to Europeans and eventually Americans slaughtering the native people in of their own country, and to more mindless killing and destruction than can be discussed in this paper. Games do not start the wars, but as a part of the media system that convinces the general public that they are a necessary part of life, games encourage the continued warring and destruction of human lives over international conflict.

Pointing fingers at society's problems is infinitely easier than even knowing the root of the problem, much less being a part of the solution. The desire for profit, no matter the cost, is a huge factor in the lack of attention towards social responsibility in games. Even when attempting to create a game design that is socially responsible, the general lack of understanding people and developers at large have with regard to these issues shines through. While *Abyme* was orders of magnitude more socially responsible than the vast majority of current popular video games, it did manage to perpetuate many of the ideals that are detrimental to society. This shows with even

more certainty the importance of understanding social responsibility and the need for more critical thought throughout the industry.

Challenges of Social Responsibility

The current games industry is filled with socially irresponsible games. So why is it so hard to make socially responsible games? For one, most games are based on their predecessors, so starting with an irresponsible framework makes it more difficult to add responsibility in later. Making anything that has not been done before is a risk due to financial unpredictability. If it has not already been proven in the industry then it will typically not get funding. Also, when considering all the choices that might be in the perfect socially responsible game, there are technical considerations. The most important obstacle, however, is that socially responsible games do not happen by accident; they must be planned and thought out ahead of time. All these factors go together in limiting the creation of socially responsible games.

Video game culture has a very violent history. Even early games such as *Asteroids* have involved conflicts with violent means of resolution. The main reason for this is that it is much easier to portray violence than it is to display more complex emotion, such as love. It is not that hatred is a simpler emotion than love, but that the violent effects tend to be more visual and obvious in nature. Players are also unused to the idea of emotional depth in games due to the flat emotional violence that has been perpetuated for so long. Since most game developers started off as just gamers, they draw on their past experiences, which tend to be violent games.

The developers, while they do make the game, are typically reliant on other publishers to fund their work. The publishers that fund the development of these games are very adverse to risk due to the potential financial risk. Developers working for publishers have to prove that there's a market out there for the game they're trying to make, and that's hard to do when there aren't

good examples of financially viable socially responsible games. Publishers do take risks, but even the "risks" that we see today do not try to be socially responsible. The financial pressures the industry constantly wrestles with interfere with progress.

The current hardware and software solutions available somewhat limit the ability of games to have meaningful decisions and to portray the whole gamut of emotion. One game that tried to do this, *Façade*, by allowing the player to influence the relationship between two characters through a complex set of dialogue choices. While this game does do a fairly good job of allowing the player to make good and bad decisions, the entire game is one conversation and in one room. Making a full-length game which allows the player to experience "true" choice is a huge technical challenge that has yet to be solved. What is most needed is some way of simplifying emotions like love and friendship and providing believable platforms for diplomacy or other non-violent choices in a way that is as easily recognizable and understandable as the way in which violence is portrayed today.

Much forethought must be involved in producing a truly responsible game. Simply wanting to be responsible is not enough to actually accomplish this goal. While this paper addresses many of the issues involved, it requires thinking about all these things when coming up with the initial game design as well as continually analyzing the effects a game will have throughout its development cycle. The time spent adapting game designs to be socially responsible is not likely to be converted directly into profit, so the motivation to make socially responsible games must be ethically-based and not financially-based. The liberation of the industry from this cycle of social irresponsibility will most likely come from individuals not bound by the same financial constraints.

Ultimately, however, the biggest obstacle standing between the current video game industry and socially responsible video games is simple ignorance that the issue even exists. It is likely that most game developers do not realize that their jobs are a part of a system supporting unjust and dangerous ideals. Most game developers do not set out to be socially irresponsible; they are merely doing what they know how to do without seeing the consequences. They cannot change the system if they do not know that it exists.

A Call to Action

When an industry is so stuck in its ways, one game or one responsible studio will not be able to break through and overcome all the issues discussed. In a culture industry that perpetuates itself endlessly, a gradual, building change needs to happen. If enough people start making a conscious effort to change, eventually the norm won't be one of socially irresponsible games.

Designers

One of the most important steps toward bringing the industry into a socially acceptable norm lies in the hands of the game developers. The industry attracts all types of people. The majority of developers simply have not thought of the repercussions of their actions, and create games because it's their job. Others do it because they need to put food on their table and they're forced to create a game that will sell. Some revel in gory, sexual gameplay and truly enjoy creating irresponsible content. A handful refuse the status quo, start their own companies and work independently to try and lead the industry into a better place.

That being said, the most important thing for developers to do is think. Socially irresponsible games are the norm in today's industry, so developers often continue to create games that thoughtlessly perpetuate negative stereotypes. Following a model of success is simple

and guaranteed to work. The majority of designers never even consider the concept that “even though something is the norm, it is not necessarily right.”

Talented designers who have a firm idea of social responsibility should take the leap into independent development and start their own studio, or join one with philosophical views similar to theirs. Hopefully, studios creating games with the idea that they need not be brimming with violence and sexuality. Even allying with people who believe games can be used as tools sensitize people and convey powerful messages will help. The more people who create games with different ideals and values, the sooner the industry will be able to dig itself out of the trench of social irresponsibility in which it currently resides.

Journalists

Game journalists also have a large part to play in bringing the industry forward. Industry news sites, game publications, and reviews have a huge following, and these all perpetuate the thoughtlessness of the industry.

Instead of revolutionizing the way the games industry reviews their games, they should simply add another form of critique to the current system. Game reviews often focus on 3 major things: gameplay, graphics, and story. They’re all rated on a basic scale, and given detailed write-ups which explain the nuances of each. Journalists rarely pay any mind to the moral content of a game, and thus there is rarely any mention of morality, humanity, historical accuracy, or any other idea. As Richard Clark states in his article “*The Gaming Doctrine: Reviewing with Values in Mind:*”

If the video game industry wants to have more thoughtful games, those writing about games need to encourage more thoughtful gaming. It’s not that reviewers should concern themselves with every possible stumbling block within a game, that they count cuss

words or recount horrible violent acts. A simple solution is to simply acknowledge when and why a game felt inspiring, tasteless, disrespectful, immature, or wonderfully nuanced. Such a thing could easily be implemented in any game review. Mention of these ideas would be ignorable by the gamer who does not wish to hear it, and those that do care would be informed.

Finally, in the gaming media sphere, there is a distinct lack of thoughtful discussion of the issues in the industry. If any ideas are brought up, it's polarized between two parties. It's a war between those who mock any who believe that morally irresponsible games may have an effect on society, and those that abhor all irresponsible games and condemn the industry as a whole. Game journalism often falls in the former category; siding with their main audience, who are typically "hardcore" gamers – the ones most likely to play morally irresponsible games. Game publications need to stop taking sides and instead offer up ideas on both ends of the spectrum for their readers to consider. Instead of being the mouthpiece to the industry, games journalists should fight for its evolution and improvement, and encourage gamers to make their industry something to be proud of.

Consumers

Despite all that's been said, it's impossible to leave the responsibility solely in the hands of the developers. In an industry driven by capitalism, the consumer is just as responsible for the content as the developer is. By buying a socially irresponsible game, the consumer supports the content's creation by showing that there is demand for the product. If the consumer stops buying socially irresponsible games; the industry will stop making them.

The consumer should also take time to fully realize and understand where they stand on the issue of moral responsibility in the games industry. Too many people jump into it without even a faint inkling of thought besides having fun with any game the industry shovels out. If a

consumer explores their beliefs and finds that they are comfortable with the morally irresponsible content they are consuming, that's their prerogative. If they believe something like that should exist, they should support it. However, some will think deeply about these issues and suddenly realize that they really are not okay with it. In the end, the consumer must stop blindly accepting and instead understand what they are supporting by thoughtfully and intelligently making a decision.

Consumers also need to be aware of the marketing that is being pushed on them. It is futile to ask marketing departments and publishers to stop doing their job. Instead, consumers need to understand the control that marketers have over the public, and not be swayed by it. They need to make their own decisions about what they want.

Finally, those who truly believe that the video game industry should begin moving towards a socially responsible era need to be vocal about it. They need to rationally discuss the issues and bring light to concepts many people do not even stop to consider. They need to avoid associating with people who cannot be convinced one way or the other; who blindly attack every indiscretion on either side with absolute disgust. Such polarizing behavior evokes a strong negative reaction from those who would seek to consider the issues in a rational manner. Such open discussion will promote a positive change in the industry.

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