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Journalism Portfolio

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Department of Journalism,
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in Journalism
and
graduation from The Honors College.

William R. Brunelle

Thesis Mentor: Rosemary Armao, M.A.

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Author’s note: All of the articles compiled here have also been prepared for publishing on the web. All are available online at my personal site, willbrunelle.com. Where applicable, I will note where an article was originally published, to make the online presentation available for comparison.

Introduction

Four years ago, my uncle handed me a card at my graduation party, with a hug and a pat on the shoulder. After the party, as I sifted through gift cards and well-wishes, I ripped open the card to find an inscription that took up residence smack in the center of my mind, not to be ignored. In his perfect, English-professor scrawl, my uncle had told me, “Go out and find what makes your soul clap hands and sing.” Four years, eight semesters and countless hours of work later, I believe I’ve completed the quest I was assigned.

Journalism was never a passion, certainly not of the sort literature or video games have always been. If my younger self wasn’t reading, he was becoming wholly absorbed by some new, fanciful digital adventure. Sometimes he was writing, a few pages of fiction here and a half-hearted journal there. There may have even been some poetry, though it was certainly of such poor quality it was erased from existence shortly after its creation.

I didn’t write a single word of journalistic intent until my second semester of college, when I was taught how to write a “punchy” lede in “35 words or less, every time.” I was an English major, used to finding any way possible to turn a five-second thought into a 15 critical review of the most boring, inaccessible subjects ever encountered by man. To turn a newsworthy event into a 300-word, perfectly comprehensive hard news story was the most daunting task I had ever faced. I couldn’t wax eloquent about the merits of the semi-colon here; the only tools given me were the cold, hard truths of the situation. I was terrified.

Then I wrote the story. It was terrible, but it had a lede, a nut-graf, and probably even a good kicker quote (I’ve always loved a good kicker). It was written in (mostly) accurate AP style, with all parties represented and all of the facts present, if jumbled and misplaced. The result was a mess of red pen, a few encouraging check marks here and there, and a resoundingly firm “B” at the top of the page. I was hooked.

I had never before encountered such fast-paced, demanding tasks set forth with such unforgiving rules and pre-determined structures. Despite the challenge, I loved the high of asking complete strangers invasive, impolite questions. I relished the thought of exposing the student groups’ horrible misuse of their fellow students’ money. I was even

more excited at the prospect of someday finishing my intro classes and being let off the hard-news leash every incoming journalism major is hooked to on their first day.

Once set free into the simultaneously enticing and terrifying world of enterprise journalism, I realized I had no actual focus to pursue. Without a breaking story to cover, I wasn't sure how to approach writing an article. So, perhaps partly in fear of the unknown, I fell back on an old comfort: video games.

In the ensuing semesters, I wrote dozens of articles about video games, some of which even wound up published in online news outlets. My passion became the driving force of my growing body of work, and the combination of the two forced me both to improve my writing and develop an even further understanding of this world that it suddenly seemed I had before only partially inhabited. I met people who create the games I've played for years, and others who live what to most are dream-lives of an alternate universe, making money just for playing their favorite games and letting others watch them play. I've met gamers who have turned gaming into a fundraising drive for charity, and others who have used it to break down stereotypes and fight back against the misogynist culture of the Internet.

Video games are drivers of innovation in technology and society. They present gamers with complex stories involving varied characters of many backgrounds and origins, and oftentimes surprise us with incredibly meaningful stories and powerful commentary on our real world. These virtual spaces become incubators for the mindsets and philosophies of tomorrow, and they deserve attention in the news for playing such a strong role in the Internet-centric and fast-paced cultures of today's world.

The portfolio that follows, I hope, will demonstrate my efforts not only to grow as a journalist, but it is also a testament to the power of video games and their desperate need for mainstream, focused attention. Four years of work have gone into this body of articles, and I can only hope a lifetime of similar endeavors will follow.

“In the Shadow of Years Past”

May 3, 2010, 7:02 p.m.—

”Bad News Dude :(“

Hey Billy

I got some bad news dude. Lee/ Killer/Shadow collapsed at home today and sadly died.

I don't know the details as Kelly and his brother (Joker) were too upset to talk. But he went to bed feeling sick, and when Kelly went to check on him a few hours later, he'd died.

I'll let you know more when I do dude.

I'm totally bummed right now, I was talking to him this morning on Xbox and in the afternoon he died! Gutted and shocked is how I feel.

Although I've never met any of you, I consider us mates, and today we've lost a mate and I feel like s***!

Sorry to give ya this bad news but Kelly & Aaron (Joker) wanted you to know. I've already called Hunter and he's shocked too.

Take care Billy, I'll let you know as soon as I know anything.”

Lee was dead. Five years of playing games together every afternoon until the early morning hours, and suddenly, never again.

I never met Lee in person. I didn't even know his name until I knew he was dead; to me, he was “Killer,” or “Ice,” or whatever other moniker he was using at the time. I knew him by his voice, by his addictions to french press coffee and cheap cigarettes. I knew him by the way his tone shifted between harsh insults to the other team and loving, doting affections lavished on his young daughter.

I didn't know what his face looked like, if he kept his apartment clean or left a mess, whether he played with a smile or a slack jaw. I only knew that Lee was young, somewhere in his late 20s, with a fiance and a child from someone who wasn't the fiance. He was from somewhere in England, and worked odd jobs that occasionally sounded like they fell on the wrong side of the law. He had a brother who sold XBOXes that “fell off

the back of trucks,” and was a DJ when the convenient gaming consoles weren’t enough to make ends meet.

Video games were just about the only thing Lee and I had in common. I was 14-years-old when we met, sitting in the “lobby” of an online match in a terrible shooting game I had just rented from a Blockbuster video store. We struck up a conversation, for lack of anything better to do (These games can sometimes take quite a while to match you with other players), and compared opinions of all the popular games of the day. We played almost all the same games, and in a short time we were playing together every single day. When I was getting home from school, he was putting his daughter to bed; the time difference wound up convenient.

Five years of playing together, surrounding ourselves with a tight-knit group of gamers who hailed from Wales, Ireland, Ohio, New York, and beyond. Five years, day in day out, sharing every major life experience with each other during late night smoke breaks, in between winning matches (We always won; Lee and I couldn’t be beat once we were together). I knew his daughter’s voice, and spoke to her almost every day. Lee would fit the XBOX headset, which I can only imagine was comically large, to her tiny head so she and I could swap school stories.

I haven’t heard his daughter’s voice since he died. I spoke briefly to his fiance on Facebook, just to give my condolences. Rob, the one who broke the bad news, never really felt like playing with “the gang” again. Neither did I. It was as if Lee’s death had cut some kind of chain that his charismatic, coffee-chugging personality had forged. We drifted apart. I haven’t talked to any of the guys in more than three years.

I’ve since moved on. I have a new “gang” filled with the same kinds of people from the same kinds of varied, myriad backgrounds. We play together most weekends, and banter and praise just like I used to with Lee and company. It’s not quite the same, though. Lee and I had a bond like a vow, breakable only by the ultimate, final event. I’m not sure I’ve ever finished grieving for the man I thought of as a brother, nor am I sure I ever will.

My story is not unique. There are innumerable gamers who have forged these bonds of kinship across the world, never knowing their dearest friends by their faces. Instead, we recognize one another by voice, and by the way we move in these fantastical,

computer-generated worlds. We never go out for beers, but many nights we trade stories through our headsets and dare each other to take just one more shot.

The Internet and video games have joined together in this last decade to create a global community of connected, passionate people. No longer are games the domain of a basement-dweller, or the introvert. Now they attract outgoing, charismatic individuals with the prospect of leading gaming teams of hundreds, or guiding the development of tight-knit, smaller teams. Gamers that play well enough compete in international tournaments for thousands of dollars. Bonds are forged, as genuine as those forged in years of physically sharing a space with someone.

It is time that gaming was viewed in a genuine, honest light. Instead of being considered a distraction for children or a breeding ground for homicidal madmen, both of which are often reported widely by the most-watched and read media outlets, it is time for gaming to be respected as a global culture and world of interconnected people, drawn together by a shared passion. Gamers are part of a new age of technology still developing, and games themselves consistently push technological boundaries and innovate the digital marketplaces we inhabit. Video games are as much a driving force of economies and advancement as personal computers and mobile devices, generating new markets and creating new ways of transmitting and receiving information at incredible speeds.

And, much as the rest of Internet-connected media, video games bring people together who might never meet otherwise. A person can befriend someone continents away as the press of a button, and spend time together in a virtual space that becomes as familiar and welcoming as a favorite coffee shop or corner deli. Video games are a critical part of our modern world, and the one “lesson” I have taken from my time spent playing games with Lee is that we should appreciate all that they have to offer us. I may never again get to talk to Lee or make his daughter laugh with a silly voice or a joke but the impressions they left on me were deep and lasting.

“Playing for Keeps: The Rise of Professional Gaming”

“This is gonna go so wrong.”

“No it’s not; it’s going to go so well. Anyone got eyes on?”

The bantering voices carry that particular subtlety unique to British accents. A rifle scope pans along a runway, a rusted and deserted group of military buildings standing across from the sniper’s position. Voices chatter until a truck horn interrupts. A bright blue cargo truck races for the open runway, horn blaring.

The sniper adjusts his aim.

“Can you smash it with that gun?” one voice asks.

“Oh my God, Chris, do it!” another says.

The rifle fires with a deafening roar, and two shots later the speeding truck’s tires are shredded. The driver bails out and attempts to run, just as the powerful rounds cause the truck to burst into flames. Moments later, compliments ring out from the sniper’s comrades as the driver goes down in a hail of gunfire.

Then the video cuts out, and the sniper’s voice comes in as his name is displayed in bold gray letters on the screen:

“SACRIEL.”

“Well, there we have it,” Sacriel says, inviting viewers to “give [the video] a thumbs up” or a “favorite” if they liked it. Then Sacriel signs off, saying, “I’ll see you next time.”

Christopher Ball, 29, who uses the handle “Sacriel” on his YouTube channel and social media sites, is not a real sniper. His weapons are not long-barreled rifles, but a mouse, headset, keyboard, and top-of-the-line computer.

But when he plays games, Ball is dead serious. His performance determines whether or

not he makes a paycheck for the week. Video gaming is Ball's full-time job.

With the rise of social media and content sites like YouTube, Twitch.tv and own3d.com, many gamers have taken to the Web. They produce videos of their gameplay with voiceovers, to teach other gamers strategy or simply to show off their own experiences, for a laugh or for bragging rights. If they get enough people to watch, these media websites will offer them what may seem like a dream come true: the chance to make money from their content by running ads in their videos.

Ball records footage of his gameplay, records commentary into the video, and uploads the final product to YouTube for fellow gamers to watch. He also streams video on Twitch.tv, showing video of his gameplay live.

For many, the amount of ad revenue is miniscule. It usually adds up to a small, supplementary paycheck compared to a salaried, career job. Ball is an exception to the rule. He has found his niche in the gaming community, and built a fanbase over several years to reach this point.

Roughly a month ago, Ball took a leap of faith into the arms of his fans.

Ball quit his job as project manager at a British Internet company to make playing games and producing videos of his gameplay a full-time job. Now he focuses on streaming as regularly as possible, and on landing sponsorships from companies that make computers and computer accessories.

"It was quite scary," Ball said, to actually commit to a future of uncertainty. His company had recently been taken over by a competitor, and he faced a promotion that offered a 25 percent raise. He was already making, in his own modest words, "a decent wage for someone my age," and it terrified him to turn away from the money and face an uncertain future. Despite all this, he found support, and jealousy, in those around him, and it encouraged him.

"My father was proud of me for working so hard and getting said wage, and he was

supportive of me chasing my dream,” Ball said. He and his father both also recognized that Ball could “easily” get another professional job if need be, due to the hard work he had put in for five years at his company. His coworkers jokingly mocked him, jealous that he could afford to walk away from his job to play video games all day.

“I needed time away from nine to five,” Ball said, and mentioned that issues in his personal life (which he would not elaborate on) also prompted him to take the plunge.

Ball doesn’t meet the stereotype of gamers. He’s skinny, with clean cut features and trimmed short brown hair. He’s of average height, and dresses like any other 20-something: in a hoodie and jeans. He’s soft spoken yet charismatic, light-hearted, and has pitch-perfect comic timing. He had a great job that paid well, and since the summer he’s been dating a young Canadian woman who traveled to England to visit friends and family and wound up staying to eventually move in with Ball.

Ball’s girlfriend Shannon, 29, who asked that her last name be kept private (she’s an online gamer as well, who savors her private life away from the Internet), runs the chatroom open to viewers of Ball’s live streams. Their relationship began in July, when Ball noticed Shannon, who goes by the handle “ShannonZKiller” (for “Shannon, Zombie Killer”), answering questions about Ball and his stream by the dozen. He recognized her as a knowledgeable fan, and they started talking about the games they played. It wasn’t long before the friendship grew into a romance.

Shannon said that she “resents how the gaming world is painted,” and that the idea that people should be doing something “better” with their time is unfair. She said that as a woman who is self-admittedly “all right on the eyes,” it’s frustrating to encounter so many social stigmas surrounding gaming, when in reality it is a passion for people of all ages, genders and backgrounds.

“People say gamers are socially stunted. That’s simply untrue,” she said. “I choose this life, because I find it fun...creative...exciting...and provoking, at times,” and other gamers share her perspective.

Tina Amini calls gaming “an escape.” Amini, the 24-year-old reviews editor for Kotaku.com, a major gaming news site, says gaming gives players “a new world to explore. Entertainment. Education.”

Blas Garcia, 24, a Dallas-based writer for That Videogame Blog, says that social media has helped video games into the mainstream. “Ten years ago you wouldn’t see big actors, much less actresses, in a Call of Duty commercial,” Garcia said. “The generation that grew up with video games is now working adults. Now it isn’t your nerdy kid playing video games, but your average Joe.”

Kaila Streichert, a 21-year-old employee of Albany retailer Jay St. Video Games, says that “Gaming means different things to different people. It can be a teenage boy wanting to form a bond with peers, or an adult having an escape from stress.” Streichert has gamed since age 6. With thick frame glasses and multi-colored hair pinned up with black chopsticks, and as a woman, she defies the gamer stereotype just like Ball.

Jay St. Video Games sells classic, plastic cartridge Nintendo games alongside the new, high definition discs, in a store where young and old, tried-and-true and experimental all come together.

In a way, the store represents the modern gaming community ((at large)). Gamers are no longer socially inept kids who spend their afternoons pumping quarters into arcade cabinets. Now they are children from preschool to college, and adults with kids, men and women of all backgrounds who, in one way or another, find amusement and solace in the artificial worlds of games.

Now they are Christopher Ball.

Streichert believes that while there “will always be some bias,” it’s “becoming more acceptable for different social groups and genders to play video games.”

One of the strongest forces behind gaming’s shift into the mainstream is the rise of a competitive gaming world, driven by the company Major League Gaming, Inc. Based in

New York City, Major League Gaming (MLG) sponsors massive competitive gaming events where thousands of gamers gather to battle it out in all genres of games. They compete for thousands in cash prizes, and come with big name sponsorships sewn on their uniforms.

In 2012 the four MLG Pro Circuit Championship weekends had more than 11.7 million unique viewers, based on information provided by Katie Goldberg, an MLG spokeswoman. These people didn't just sign in to see what the hype was about and then leave, either. The average viewer watched for more than three hours of competition. It was the ninth annual Pro Circuit since the organization's founding in 2002, and since 2010 the amount of Pro Circuit online viewers has increased by more than 600 percent.

From June 8-10 of 2012, MLG hosted the Spring Championship in the Anaheim Convention Center in California. Twenty thousand people went to watch the tournament unfold, and all 20,000 erupted into roaring applause when gamer "DongRaeGu" won the \$25,000 grand prize for his final victory in the game StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty.

The highest paid professional gamer in the world is 32-year-old South Korean StarCraft player Lim Yo-Hwan. He makes an estimated \$500,000 a year in winnings and sponsorships.

Amini views this rapid growth of the competitive gaming world as a natural expansion on gaming itself. "Gaming is a competitive environment," she said. "We've been competing since arcade days. The tournaments are like a modern, bigger expression of that."

Why do people watch? Garcia believes it has something to do with comparing your own gaming style to those of gamers online and in competitions. "Just like sports fanatics...yell at the quarterback to throw the ball, you get that same excitement pointing to your computer screen for the guy to shoot the guy hiding behind the wall," Garcia says.

Garcia and Streichert also said that the use of "walkthrough" videos to teach gamers how to complete challenging games popularized videos of gameplay online.

“Sacriel” fan “Sikoras” (who asked that his name be kept private, as his screenname is his only online moniker) watches because he loves Ball’s personality. As a fellow live-streamer (on a much smaller scale, with only 149 followers on Twitch.tv), he learns from Ball, and gets a kick out of watching the gameplay.

When Sikoras finds out that Ball is streaming, he gets a mug of hot tea ready, sets up some homework (he’s a 20-year-old university student from Plymouth, UK) on his secondary computer monitor, and settles in to watch the night’s events unfold. He likes to pitch in and participate in the chatroom during the stream, and “sometimes...but not often,” he’ll grab a beer to enjoy during the stream.

Ball has 57,515 subscribers on YouTube, and a total of 7.6 million video views. On Twitch.tv, where he provides his live footage, he has 19,044 followers, and has been watched by 1.5 million people. Ball allows YouTube and Twitch to place ads before and during his videos, which earns him a small amount of money per 1,000 viewers that see the ad.

Ball also asks for donations to support his Internet content. From Oct. 16 until Nov. 16, when his webpage stopped showing the total amount donated, he made exactly \$4,500. The average viewer donated \$22.50. Now Ball also allows people to “Subscribe” to him on Twitch, giving fans the option to pay \$5 every month in order to avoid watching advertisements during live streams.

“I am blown away by the support my subscribers have shown me,” Ball said. He said that some people donate more than \$150 to him, and others donate any small amount they can afford just to show support.

“I feel like I can relate to Sacriel’s situation, and this donation makes more sense to me than donating to big companies I feel nothing in common with,” said chatroom user “Burbsi,” a 27-year-old factory worker from Switzerland who has been watching Ball for more than six months.

“I watch for entertainment,” said “Caboose7778.” “He quit his job. He deserves the

money.”

“It’s how Youtubers and livestreamers make their money,” said Sikoras. “People like the idea of someone being rewarded for what they do.”

Ball admits that after the first couple months, donations may slow down as donators run out of interest, or funds.

“I have had a massive burst of donations, but that will drop off sharply. Then I’m back to living off [ad] revenue.” But he’s confident he can make it work. “I have enough savings to get by for a year or two. My goal at the moment is to generate enough to comfortably live off, and my livestream and YouTube alone I can currently live off.”

The switch hasn’t been easy. “I randomly edit. I randomly stream. My sleeping is still all over the place,” Ball said. “Once everything settles down, I hope to put some structure in place to help my career grow properly.”

Two weeks ago, Ball got his first sponsorship by the company ROCCAT, which makes computer accessories. He also recently “shout-casted” from DreamHack Winter in Sweden, a major gaming convention and competition, and has been invited back to shout-cast the summer event in June.

While his life remains unbalanced by his new career, Ball is optimistic. As for what he looks forward to the most?

“I look forward to developing my already awesome community to continue to support me and make me smile at the end of each stressful day.”

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<http://www.inmotiongaming.com/playing-for-keeps-the-rise-of-professional-gaming/>

“Rated S for ‘Scapegoat’”

In the wake of the Sandy Hook shooting, word traveled fast that the shooter, Adam Lanza, had been a video gamer. Amid cries for gun control and safer school campuses, conversations began about the potential role of video games in influencing Lanza to go on a shooting spree. This is true of the months following any major shooting in recent U.S. history: Columbine, Virginia Tech, the Aurora Theater shooting, and so forth. But video games have already been tried, and they have been found innocent.

Violence in video games does not cause violence in real life.

Corrupt Shadow Industry of Misinformation

Most recently, one of the number one opponents of violence in games has been Wayne LaPierre, the Executive Vice President of the National Rifle Association, undoubtedly the nation’s strongest 2nd Amendment support group.

In a press conference held in the days immediately after the Sandy Hook shooting, LaPierre named games such as “Grand Theft Auto” as signifiers of a “corrupt shadow industry” that “sows, and sells, violence against its own people.” He argued that video games essentially prepare gamers to go out into the real world and kill.

LaPierre’s arguments fail when his criticisms are pulled apart and examined, and they get even more questionable when placed against his clear motive in making these statements. It is important to remember that the NRA was coming under a great deal of fire in the wake of Sandy Hook, as were issues of gun ownership. LaPierre’s job, in holding this conference, was to deflect attention away from the guns and onto something else; whether or not his arguments had any credibility was irrelevant.

President Obama and Vice President Biden did not come out as strongly as LaPierre against video games, but both of them *did* call for further studies to be done on the effects of violence in games, which insinuates that video game violence and real-world violence are somehow intrinsically linked.

Shining a Light on the Truth

However, the studies *have* been done. They've even been funded by the U.S. government. One in particular, conducted by the Secret Service and Department of Education in July of 2004 examined a series of 41 previous school property shootings in the U.S. It discovered that there was no discernible link between a shooter having an affinity for "violent" video games and their eventual crime, and in fact, only a very small number of the shooters played games at all. In fact, the ultimate determination of the study, an attempt to create a profile of possible future school shooters, was that there is *no firm profile of such individuals*.

Another study, conducted by Lillian Bensley and Juliet Van Eenwyck, studies all of the research undertaken to that point by other researchers, and analyzes the findings to come to a collective conclusion. That conclusion? "Current research evidence is not supportive of a major concern that violent video games lead to real-life violence."

They found that in some studies, subjects were recorded as being "more aggressive" immediately after concluding a gaming session, but the word "aggressive" is unclearly defined. Researcher and author Cheryl Olson, who published the book *Grand Theft Childhood* (with husband Lawrence Kutner) after conducting her own study of game violence, said that "There is no widely agreed-upon definition of aggression." She said that often, questionable or abstract measurements, such as pushing a button to emit blasts of static at imaginary individuals in "other rooms" are used to measure it.

Olson wrote in an Op-Ed for "Gamasutra" after the Sandy Hook shooting, "Given that playing violent video games is a statistically normal behavior for 13-year-old boys (and many girls), and that youth violence has been declining since the mid-1990s, it's hard to argue that the typical teen is harmed by them in any significant or lasting way."

In addition to youth violence decreasing since the mid-1990s, youth arrests overall have also declined. Only 4,857 juveniles out of every 100,000 were arrested in 2010, versus

roughly 8,500 per 100,000 in 1996. Overall, youth arrests have seen a decrease of 24 percent since 1980. If video games were directly causing violence, then it would have surely become most evident in these intervening years since their introduction and sudden proliferation in the U.S. However, the data shows exactly the opposite.

Olson, in the study that led to the publication of *Grand Theft Childhood*, found that young people that don't play video games at all are at a *higher* risk for getting into fights and delinquency at school or at home. While she notes that the lack of playing games did not necessarily cause the higher risk, it could be seen as a marker for this type of behavior as a possibility.

Gaming, Olson says, is a normal habit for young teens today. According to Olson's examination of all previously existing studies on video games and violence before her own, "There is no good evidence that violent media exposure causes real-world violence or crime."

You Can't Believe Everything You See on TV

So why, then, do video games get such a bad reputation? Where does this conclusion come from, if it has no basis in the research itself?

"It's much easier to talk about protecting children from video games than from child abuse, violent neighborhoods, access to guns or other more relevant issues," Olson said.

"[Gaming] is a misunderstood medium," said Tina Amini, contributing editor at Kotaku.com. "The fact that it takes violence and makes it an interactive act, seen often through the first person perspective, scares people."

Many people, Amini said, don't have much experience with games besides what they see and hear about them in the news and on TV. "And if that's the only thing you knew about games, you might feel that way too."

Much of the public has limited exposure to games; while more people are playing them than ever, the games that are getting played are still separated a great deal by age. Less

40-year-old gamers, for example, are likely to be playing “Battlefield” or “Call of Duty” than 20-year-olds.

However, part of this problem rests with the media and with politicians; their job is to keep the public informed, and it should be their goal to discover what they can about these games, and the research that has already been done, rather than insisting that there either is a link or not yet enough evidence to come to a conclusion about the effects of games. They should go out of their way to find every bit of information they can, rather than relying on one-off screenshots of violent scenes in games, or taking the word of individuals like Wayne LaPierre, who are *paid* to twist the truth and find a scapegoat for violence.

When asked whether she believes game contribute to violence, Amini had a short, definitive answer to give: “Absolutely not. I think mental conditions and upbringing and many, many other factors play a role in that.”

This is the logical conclusion to be made, in fact. Millions upon millions of people play video games; if video games had a direct, causal link to real life violence, the proportions of gamers who committed violent acts would be much higher. Games are blamed because they are a new, and as Amini called them, “misunderstood” medium. In reality, studies such as that of Bensley and Van Eenwyck found that there’s no difference in the effects of *movies* and video games. In essence, if violence in games were causing these killings, then movies should have the same effect, yet this clearly is not the case.

Games are a scapegoat, and an identifiable one that can be easily dealt with and shamed. Mental health screening, complex gun control legislation and other measures are costly, in-depth, and take a long time to put together. Rallying public support for such a polarizing set of issues is much harder than convincing NRA members, of which the stereotype is essentially the anti-thesis of the stereotypical gamer, and other public officials to attack a medium which they do not participate in creating or distributing. They do not understand it, therefore, their views on the subject are more malleable.

Olson feels that in time, focus will shift to newer, more trendy mediums. “In maybe a decade, the politicians who have never played video games will have retired, and unreasonable fears will move on to whatever new entertainment medium comes next.”

An Inalienable Right

The United States Supreme Court ruled in 2011 that video games are a protected medium under the First Amendment, and therefore their content is a form of free speech, free from threats of censorship or redaction. Their creators have the inalienable protection of the Constitution to place whatever kinds of content they wish into their games, unregulated and uncensored by the government.

“Developers should be able to create content that speaks to and for them and others,” Amini said. “I won't necessarily agree with all of it or find it in good taste, and I think that controversial topics are likely to be passed over by publishers, but that doesn't mean a developer should be restricted from creating something.”

However, while this view is held by many involved in the gaming world, developers have recognized that it would be unfair to put out games with no system of warning consumers of the subject matter, or of indicating their target audiences. And so, the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) was born.

The ESRB is an organization, formed of former workers in the gaming industry, who are presented with content from each game slated to be released in the U.S., a summary of the plot and setting of the game, and review the contents before the game's distribution to retailers. The ESRB then collectively affixes a rating to the game, drawn from a very precise, particular scale.

Video games like “Grand Theft Auto,” “Call of Duty,” and “Battlefield” are regularly rated “M for Mature,” especially in the age of high-powered graphics and heightened realism. The game cases bear these warnings much like movie cases, in the corner, with short lists of the contents that earned them the ratings. Common lists include phrases like “Blood and Gore,” “Strong Language,” and so on.

In most retail locations nationwide, you must be over the age of 17 to purchase one of these games, which is the recommended age for playing that is shown on each “M” rating image. These age recommendations of each ESRB rating mirror those of the Motion Picture Association of America’s ratings; “E” is equivalent to “G,” “E 10+” to “PG,” “T” to “PG-13,” and “M” to “R.”

Access to this content is limited, and the game consoles themselves have parental controls built in to allow parents to prevent their children from accessing content that is too mature for them to see. This is all undertaken voluntarily, by companies which the government has deemed free from censorship or intervention on the basis of a right to free speech.

The Messages of the Medium

Perhaps the most important argument to be made is that games don’t simply drop gamers into a room with a gun, and tell them to shoot everything that moves. They tell *stories*, especially in this age of high-performance technology and intensely political stories trending in the news every single day.

“Grand Theft Auto IV,” as it was initially released, is the story of an immigrant to America who wants to leave behind his troubled criminal past but finds that America is not as open and welcoming as he believes. The later expansions on the title give new perspectives on stories that intersect with the original’s, such as “The Ballad of Gay Tony.”

“The Ballad of Gay Tony” follows the bodyguard of an anxious, over-stressed and drug-addicted gay man who owns a nightclub and gets drawn into the criminal underworld despite every effort to avoid it when he can. It was one of the first narratives in a major game release to prominently feature an openly gay character, and to depict not only the “sex” portion of his sexuality, but his whole personality and being.

Video games are more than the violence that some of them contain. In today's age, they deal with contemporary topics of political, cultural and societal value. They criticize governments, and don't shy away from issues that matter.

Foes of the industry, like Wayne LaPierre, work to blame games for violence because they've never picked up a game and been shown what it really is. They say more research needs to be done because the research that *has* been done doesn't support what they believed when they first asked for it.

Video games don't cause violence in real life. Troubled, bullied, unstable, outcast and exiled people do. Video games are just easier to blame than troubled people are to find and help.

“Girls in Games, from a Girl who Games”

Shannon Marie “Killer” (she goes by “ShannonZKiller” online) has been gaming since she was 6. She plays games three to seven hours a day, and uploads videos of some of her gameplay to the Internet. She plays puzzle games, action games, adventure titles and roleplaying games.

Shannon sees one thing missing in a big way in all of that: the presence of strong, capable women, either as characters or gamers.

Shannon (who asked that her last name not be given, to protect her personal life from her online audiences), of Vancouver, British Columbia, started gaming when her father brought home the family’s first gaming console: the NES. She wasn’t allowed to use it often—and then only with strict supervision.

“He used to stare over my shoulder like a hawk,” Shannon said. But soon, the family moved on to a desktop computer, a model so early that it was just one massive rectangular shape with a monitor built in. After that, Shannon found that she couldn’t stop.

“I would get frustrated, and never get anywhere in the games as a kid, but I couldn’t stop playing them,” she said. They appealed to her, just as they appealed to her father, and appealed to her four siblings. They are still gamers. And Shannon correctly asserts that she is not the only woman with a passion for games and gaming.

Shannon is almost exactly the median age of gamers in the U.S.; at 29, she’s seven months from hitting the average. In addition, while gaming marketing and the popular American discussion of gaming makes the industry seem almost wholly dominated by men, women make up 47 percent of gamers, and 48 percent of game purchasers, according to a study released in mid-2012 by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA).

The study as a whole shows that gaming is not a young male’s hobby, as it is often

described; in fact, it's the hobby of an extremely diverse crowd. Roughly a third of gamers are under 18; another third is between 18 and 35; the final third is 36 or older. Evenly divided by gender, how they play games, and what kind of games they play (though some genres do hold much larger shares of the market), the ESA's study suggests that there is no longer, or perhaps never was, an "average gamer."

However, in games, there is still very much an average female character, Shannon said.

"Everyone is a variant of Princess Peach [from Mario Bros.], essentially useless, and is trapped in a castle, the grand representation of women as inaccessible," Shannon said. "How women are typically portrayed is laughable."

Tina Amini, the 24-year-old coordinating of *Kotaku*, agrees.

"It's the age-old idea of sex sells. While your male characters are all waltzing around in full armor, female characters have breastplates and mini-skirts," Amini said. She said that most male/female interactions in games are romantic, and that there should be more women that are "integral to the story," rather than objects of attraction.

Shannon seeks out games for herself that "don't hold your hand, and force you to be a big kid," she said. Shannon plays games that many find challenging, such as *DayZ*, a zombie survival game that forces players to make every decision carefully, and punishes deaths not with a loading screen, but with starting over from scratch. "I favor games that treat me like I'm not the lowest common denominator," Shannon said.

She's a departure from the mental image most hold of gamers. With reddish hair that falls neatly to her shoulders, sharp features and a trim waistline, she looks perfectly the opposite of what most imagine when they consider women who play video games. She dresses as any woman in her late-20's might, and conducts herself with confidence and quiet intelligence.

Lara Croft Redux

Right now, Shannon's working on beating the new game Tomb Raider, by developer Crystal Dynamics. An entry in a series that dates back to the early days of the first Playstation console, Crystal Dynamics' reboot of the series hinges on changing up the formula that had driven the series into redundancy.

The main character, Lara Croft, was a temple- and cave-diving adventurer, looking for treasure in exotic locales. Yet she was always clad in a tiny tank top, the shortest of shorts, and packed two massive handguns on her hips for killing any monsters or bad guys who got in her way. And Lara also had perhaps the most generously digitized breasts of any character in gaming.

Yet Crystal Dynamics has recognized a new way of approaching the series, and has attempted to make its version of the game more realistic, and to make Lara relatable in ways that go beyond physical beauty.

"There's no lack of chest in the new Tomb Raider," Shannon said. "But it manages to walk this fine line, still fulfilling that cheap, thrill-ish need of cleavage and sexy grunts. It has given us a young, empowered, brave woman who's not being hung out to dry for it."

Amini also cited the new Lara Croft as a brave step forward for women in games.

"Lara Croft in Tomb Raider is a badass survivor. She's assertive, attentive, smart, adaptable, strong, brave, loyal," Amini said.

Shannon said that she embraces and welcomes this change of pace for the character and series, and that she doesn't believe the new Lara would have been well received in the original games.

"If this was the Lara Croft they gave us 10 years ago, they would've been nailed to a cross. It would've been seen as neo-feminist even a decade ago, and it was in their best interests not to do it," Shannon said.

“I would recommend [the new Tomb Raider] to my 16-year-old sister. This is a perfectly fine game character, one of the first,” Shannon said.

Fighting Back Against Grand Theft Auto

Shannon believes that some game developers willfully cross a line into negligence, offense, and misogyny in their games. She accused developers Lionhead (Fable series) and RockStar (Grand Theft Auto series) of such offenses, citing the player’s ability to marry multiple women, and then kill them, in Fable, and the player’s ability to hire and then rob and murder prostitutes in Grand Theft Auto.

“These are side notes, one-off things that clearly the developers think it’s funny to add. And it’s really only ever been for cheap entertainment,” Shannon said. And it’s partially the responsibility of her fellow gamers to demand that game developers change their products and how they portray their female characters.

“It’s lazy to say ‘That’s bulls***,’ and not do anything,” Shannon said. If gamers didn’t allow developers to get away with offensive stereotypes and portrayals, she believes that the industry would see much faster change.

She also sees video game journalism as part of the problem. Citing YouTube channel “Machinima” as an example, Shannon said that “Video game journalism is horrible.”

“[Machinima does] little bits where they show news videos for the week and there’s always one of girls in underwear, and that’s always the thumbnail for the video, to push video to their demographic audience. It’s not news, it’s not journalism; it’s cheap entertainment,” Shannon said.

Women have had to fight for rights for hundreds of years, Shannon said, and their portrayal in games is incredibly important. “Games are a creation, something that people can form however they like. It’s a great opportunity to push the envelope with the female image.”

As a gamer, Shannon makes videos for the Internet of her own gameplay, and sometimes

includes footage of herself being taped in front of the screen. But her videos differ from others', she says, because hers aren't about a "low-cut top and a push-up bra."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with push-up bras, or having feminine traits. But I think there's a right time, a right place, and an appropriate way to do things," Shannon said.

Shannon has been making videos of Tomb Raider gameplay recently, and often comments on Lara as a female character while she plays, or about the quality of storytelling and emotion the game evokes. Shannon presents herself in a strong, intelligent light, refusing to use the "cheap" tactics that other video gamers and journalists have stooped to.

Shannon is part of an equal half of gamers that isn't given a fair treatment. Men are praised, depicted as independent, strong heroes, and flaunt their intelligence in games. Women are often decoration, victims, speechless, or ancillary. It's important that women, as an equal portion of the gaming community, refuse to accept misogyny in games, Shannon said.

"I know we've come a long way," Shannon said. "But it's something that girls need to be very mindful of because of the history that we have."

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“Payday 2: Nothing feels as good as getting paid”

Overkill Software has built upon the success of their first game *Payday: The Heist*, and once again proven that not many things are as fun as grabbing some friends and spending an evening pulling off high-risk, high-reward bank heists and jewelry store robberies.

Payday 2

PC (Reviewed), PS3, Xbox 360

Developer: Overkill Software

Publisher: 505 Games

MSRP: \$29.99 (PC), \$39.99 (PS3/Xbox360), \$59.99 (Special Edition)

The game drops players into the shoes of a professional armed robber, and immediately opens up a map of the city with dozens of options for heists of varying difficulties and payoffs. Targets range from banks, to jewelry stores, to meth labs and more. The heists can be played offline and completed solo or with two AI teammates, or online with three human teammates. Integrated voice and text chat, along with intelligent contextual environmental interactions, makes playing online with others simple and drops the learning curve to an almost flat plane, with players showing one another the ropes.

Players earn both cash and experience points from completing jobs successfully, and can then use the cash for equipment and guns, and the experience points to boost their abilities in any of the four skill trees in the game. The skill trees are standard fare, with a leader (who carries a medic bag), a gunman (who carries spare ammo for the team), a technician (who carries explosives), and a scout/stealth class (who can jam hostages' and security teams' electronics to slow police response times). The ability to spend points in any tree at any time means that one player can be a jack-of-all-trades, and many players do just that, finding valuable help in the perks granted from individual branches of each class.

The gunplay is fast-paced and intense, with beautiful sound effects and dozens of gorgeous weapon models.

The gunplay is fast-paced and intense, with beautiful sound effects and dozens of gorgeous weapon models. The police respond to heists, set up outside the building, and assault in waves, once their full team has arrived. Their tactics change rapidly and

dynamically, making player communication imperative to surviving each assault. The AI is smart enough to dodge killing fields, and police tend to move in squads, even breaching rooms and clearing their own sectors rather than all immediately aiming at the nearest robber. The ensuing gun battles are heated, and force robbers to take cover and spend their ammo wisely, to avoid running out in the midst of a police assault.

The shooting mechanics themselves deserve special mention. In most FPS titles, "hip-fire," or firing without aiming down the sights first, results in a wild spray of inaccurate rounds that does almost nothing to stem the tide of incoming enemies. In *Payday 2*, firing without aiming down the sights feels like it should: slightly less accurate, but still the result of having your rifle firmly against your shoulder and pointed at one particular spot in your field of view. The bullets will go (mostly) where you direct them, with or without your sights, meaning that quick bursts at close-to-medium ranges are actually quite effective. This allows squads of robbers to move quickly through a crowded room or alley without having to move at the infuriatingly slow pace induced by aiming down the sights.

Each heist level allows players as much time as they want in "casing mode," during which they may explore their targets and learn the layout, guard patrol patterns, and so on. Casing mode allows players to make a plan ahead of the heist itself, and often allows human players to each get into separate positions to make the most of the critical first few seconds of the heist.

I've spent some time with the game out since its release, and my favorite jobs are still bank heists. Complex, fluid and long, these jobs require constant communication and cooperation between teammates. Police response is rapid and heavy, resulting in one massive, prolonged shootout from windows, rooftops and doorways.

In one such heist, my teammates and I took the direct approach, barging in the front door and immediately putting the security guards on the ground. As soon as the vault drill was set up, we deployed our equipment bags (ammo, health, etc.) and took up positions, calling out when police were assaulting our sectors and helping each other out when the

odds became too greatly stacked in the cops' favor. The whole heist took over fifteen minutes, largely because we had to spend eight or so minutes trying to just shoot our way out a side door and make it across the street to the getaway vehicle. The stress induced by shouting over your microphone just to be heard above the sound of high-powered rifles, screaming hostages and flashbangs is incredible, and every successful job will leave the player with a massive adrenaline rush.

It's worth pointing out that newcomers may have a hard time finding a welcoming game lobby. Many high-level gamers seemed eager to kick me from the game for my low level, before I could reassure them that I'd put whole days into the game when it was only in beta. It would take me around four attempts to find someone willing to let me participate in the harder heists. While I don't blame folks for wanting a fellow experienced robber on their side, it does somewhat beg the question: if no one wants inexperienced players on their team, how will anyone gain the necessary experience?

The environments, while well-designed, are not too varied. Each type of heist exists in only one location, so a "Four Stores" heist, located on a street with four target stores, will always be laid out the same no matter where it appears on the heist selection map. Small details do change within the levels, such as the location of store/bank safes, resources such as planks (which can be used to barricade windows and impede police gunfire and movement), and the number of guards or civilians. These small changes add some variety to the otherwise repetitive levels, allowing the player to experience a heist differently at least for a few extra playthroughs.

I will take a pause here, however, to give credit to one of my favorite features in the game: the player's safe house. Accessible through the main menu, this house has one room of particular interest: the vault. Here, the player's guns and attached modifications are showcased, along with giant stacks of cash representing their bank accounts and criminal achievements thus far. It is incredibly rewarding to return from a high-risk bank heist to view a fresh pile of cash stacked neatly on the table in your personal vault.

My overall sense of the game is overwhelmingly positive. When grouped with dedicated and talkative cohorts, the heists were dynamic, intense, and extremely rewarding. This is an engaging FPS that is a nice change of pace from the usual fare, and it offers unique challenges with unique mechanics. It may not be perfect, but it's well worth the price tag, and it only gets more fun as you unlock weapons, modifications and skills.

Score: 8/10 - Review Scale

My parting advice for beginner thieves? Control the crowd, and make every shot count.

"Don't Starve," or "How to Hunt Rabbits and Start Forest Fires"

Klei Entertainment's quirky survival game is unforgiving, tense, and deceptively welcoming. Featuring Wilson the "Gentleman Scientist" as the player's (first) avatar, the game drops players into an alternate universe where all is fine and well while the sun shines, but ominous, terrifying and even lethal at night. *Don't Starve* is a game that, like many others in the PC survival genre, drops players into a world with little to no explanation of how to begin.

You awaken in one of the many terrain types the game has to offer, and a mysterious figure tells you that you "don't look too good," and that you "should find some food before it gets dark." Without another word of advice or instruction, the figure disappears, and the player is left to figure out what to do next on their own.

When the sun does eventually set, strange sounds and deep, impenetrable shadows await those too unwise to set up a camp and build a strong fire. Leering eyes and guttural growls creep in from the dark, and unseen monsters threaten to devour the player at every turn. Surviving the first night in *Don't Starve* is hardly cause for celebration, however. After all, there will be many more nights to come, and each and every one is as dangerous as the last.

Don't Starve

PC

Developer/Publisher: Klei Entertainment

Released: April 23, 2012

MSRP: \$14.99

Players' main goal is simply not to die. Whether by starvation, exposure or an encounter with beasts, death is the irreversible loss of any and all progress you've made; upon death, the player is forced to start all over again at Day 1 of their survival (and after sometimes dozens of days, that can be a crippling blow). Survival is accomplished by rapidly gathering the supplies necessary to make an axe, then some logs for the first night's campfire. The next day, food should be number one on Wilson's to-do list. After that? Well, that's when immediate needs become somewhat easier to control, provided enough

wood and food have been stockpiled, and the player can begin to explore the game's vibrant, detailed, and complex world.

The story the game is founded on is somewhat thin, but provides a fun challenge for players. At any time, players can activate "Adventure Mode," taking them into another world where they start fresh, building the scientific contraption known only as the "Wooden Thing" in order to progress from level to level. Players get to carry only four items from level to level, so once again, inventory management and prior planning is key.

The story pits the player against evil mastermind Maxwell, who is responsible for trapping the avatar in this odd dimension. By building the "Wooden Thing," players are able to bring themselves repeatedly one layer closer to Maxwell's lair, with the hopes of eventually defeating him and securing their freedom.

In reality, the story is more of an excuse to build and explore under new and different constraints, and is somewhat like an amplified version of the sandbox mode, testing players' ability to plan and handle unexpected situations on the fly. While an interesting arc, it's not very complex, and is instead a nice way of seeing if you're up to the challenge of getting yourself all the way to Maxwell.

The game may not offer much in the way of tutorials, but it shows tooltips and interactions when you mouse-over anything in the world, and often you can infer what will happen or what you should do just from these tidbits. Saplings, for example, can be harvested into twigs, flowers into petals, berry bushes into edible berries, and so on. The interface is, as with the rest of the game, colorful, intuitive, and slowly but surely self-explanatory. Meters track Wilson's health, hunger, and sanity, and the inventory system is a simple row of boxes along the bottom of the screen. There's a convenient mini-map in the corner to let players know what resources are close by, and a larger map of the explored world (which shows where you've been, where resources are, and the locations of all of your constructions) is only a hotkey away.

Crafting utilities such as "Science Machines" can be constructed, and when in their proximity, the player can then make new and more advanced tools, structures or other

implements. Eventually players can build walls and other fortifications, and perhaps, with enough diligence and planning, a whole house. Inventory and storage management slowly becomes key, and organization early will save headaches later on.

Don't Starve is a charming game, and it draws players in quickly with its easily navigable and oftentimes easy to interpret world and building blocks. Players progress at their own pace, which allows the length of playthroughs to grow along with the players' own skills. Often, survival is only one mistake away, and those mistakes will happen frequently in the beginning. Death, while heartbreaking, is only an invitation to try again and persevere, and the rewarding feelings of an extra night survived are well worth the effort. The challenges never stop coming, but advance with the player. Once you've learned to handle campfires that grow out of control or learn to harvest honey without being stung to death by bees, you'll need to learn how to catch new kinds of prey or handle rapidly dwindling sanity, and the hallucinations that come with it.

Score: 8/10 - Review Scale

Perhaps best described as a grimmer, directed envisioning of building sims like *Minecraft*, *Don't Starve* makes for a very thrilling experience, surrounding players simultaneously with great challenges and even greater potential rewards. Developer updates are frequent and detailed, and in about 30 hours of gameplay, I encountered no bugs or glitches. The art direction is astounding, and the whimsical, sometimes unsettling music matches the atmosphere of Wilson's world perfectly.

I would recommend this game to anyone who enjoys a good nerve-wracking challenge, and give them these words of advice: Learn to catch rabbits, and try not to set the world on fire.

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