

The Ethics of Video Games

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Introduction

In the earliest games, questions regarding ethics related to game design never existed. Sure, there were some games where you are one block on the screen shooting at another block, such as in the classic game Asteroids, but it wasn't anything that stirred up a great concern for the general public. As computer graphics evolve, games are becoming more and more realistic, especially in terms of visuals. Games like Street Fighter and Mortal Kombat have become popular titles; these games involve a lot of violence where blood and gore drive the popularity and sales of the games. The improved visuals are pushing ethical questions into consideration for game designers. Concerns regarding the implications of allowing children to play a game where they can roam around a city, steal cars, and murder people, come into play. Various games have caused great controversies because of their content; one example is the Grand Theft Auto (GTA) series, in the GTA games, players are allowed to roam a life like-city and hijack cars, commit various crimes, and kill people. Various countries around the world have banned the sale of GTA games.

Developer's Perspective

The reason the game designers of the GTA series games created a series of games packed with violence and crime is not because they wanted to demonstrate to children what they should be doing in real life, rather, it is to increase profit. By only focusing on the financial gains, the creators of video games overlook the ethical problems associated with creating video games. Designers of video games should realize that they have a great impact on how their games can affect the learning process and development of hundreds of thousands of children who play their games. Instead of solely focusing on making the largest profit possible and following the trend towards more violent and realistic games, game studios should try to focus on catering to their audiences; designing alternative titles that are still attractive to a large fan base but without the drawbacks associated with those games that follow the industries mainstream design. There are a lot of successful game titles available that do not involve violence. Some of the popular titles include Guitar Heroes, various sports titles such as the NBA 2K series, and the NBA Live series. Even if the game is designed around an inherently violent theme, such as World War 2, there can still be precautions taken to make sure those games conform with some sort of ethics guideline. For example, in the case of Men of Valor, a game designed around the Vietnam War, the designers knew their game was rated M for ages 17 and up; but they also knew minors were going to get their hand on copies of the game. Thus, this knowledge affected how the game was made. The designers carefully thought out what was necessary to make the game as realistic as possible, yet at the same maintaining the game suitable for children. They omitted scenes with the use of drugs and prostitution because they deemed it unnecessary to perpetrate a more realistic war environment; despite the fact that it actually occurred during the period of the Vietnam War. The logic behind this method is that the inclusion of those themes would be harmful to the minors that got their hands on copies of the game and discovered these inappropriate contents [5].

Critic's Perspective

The most controversial feature of the GTA San Andreas game is the “hot coffee” mod. The mod allows the player to unlock a portion of the game which was removed by the development team because of the ethical issues involved. The mod allows the player to play in a mini-game where the main character has sexual relations with his girlfriend. Various news outlets quickly published articles that criticized Rockstar, the developer of the game, for including the inappropriate mod in the game. Law suits soon followed, eventually forcing the developer to release patches making it impossible for the mode to be unlocked. Most people would hastily agree with the critics, but upon closer examination, it is easy to see the contents from the “hot coffee” mod were actually taken off by the developers most likely because of the awareness of the ethical issues related to it. As quoted by the original creator of the mod: “...*all this material is completely inaccessible in an unmodded version of the game. It can therefore not be considered a cheat, easter-egg or hidden feature. But is most probably just leftover material from a game play idea that didn't make the final release. I would really like to stress that this material is only accessible after willingly applying the hot coffee mod (or something similar) to the game*” [1]. People need to question whether or not it is ethically sound to blame the developer when it remains clear that the users themselves voluntarily unlocked the contents. Critics and parents regularly blame the game developers without hesitation when it comes to issues related to gaming, they fail to look into their own actions. Often times, the parent is the one who buys the rated M games for their 10 year-old son. When the parents find out there is content that is inappropriate for the obvious reasons, they blame, and sometimes will go so far as to sue the game developers. The same thing can be said of the critics; there is often an unfair treatment applied towards the gaming industry. Games are a form of entertainment; they are no different from a movie or book. Even though there is user interaction involved, the course of the story is often hard-coded, and cannot be changed. Almost never is a review of a movie ever published saying there is too much violence involved; and it could be dangerous for our kids to be watching this kind of stuff. However, everyone will jump on the gun when a game with a lot of violence is produced. In fact just like the movies, the Entertainment Software Rating Board, otherwise known as the ESRB, does a great job in categorizing games according to their contents. When a developer is developing a game aimed for the adult audience it will have an adult level rating. It is then the parent's responsibility to enforce the rating given to the game and identify which games are suitable for their children.

Tactical Iraqi and Virtual Iraq

A study conducted by Losh at the University of California in Irvine discusses two video games being used as virtual reality simulations in order to train military personnel. These games, *Tactical Iraqi* and *Virtual Iraq*, aim to “accelerate a soldier's acquisition of spoken Arabic to assist in volatile tactile situations” and “lessen the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among combat veterans” [2]. Losh questions whether it is ethical to develop games such as these two; knowing at the same time what their purpose is, and that they are indeed government-funded projects. It is also necessary to keep in mind the purpose of video games in today's society. Especially after the events of September 11, it has become widely known that the hijackers used flight simulator games to train for the attacks. Though flight simulators certainly aren't in the same category as these two military funded video games, similarities can be drawn from the way that these games are being used.

Ever since the U.S. began the war in Iraq in 2003, the American government has allocated more and more funds in the development of video games. These video games recreate the battlefield and cities of Iraq, even down to specific details of language and cultural tendencies of the native people. *Tactical Iraqi* is a project from the Information Sciences Institute at the University of Southern California. The specific purpose of this game is to help soldiers learn and memorize specific Arabic words and phrases. Using a third-person perspective in this game, it is interesting to note that the game itself is based on an already popular game known as *Unreal Tournament*. In *Unreal Tournament*, players use futuristic weaponry in order to combat against others; of course this game also entails the usual blood and gore.

Virtual Iraq is a project from the Institute for Creative Technologies, also at the University of Southern California. One of the goals of this game is to “trigger psychologically powerful memories in combat veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” [2] so that they may appropriately and healthily handle their disorder. Utilizing a first-person perspective, this game is a virtual reality simulator.

These war games have been strongly criticized, questioning the “appropriateness of lending their intellectual capital to military-funded endeavors” [2]. Losh contends that these programmers are supporting an invading army by providing these types of games in aid of the military. However, three points are argued in defense of these types of games: “such programs aid working class soldiers on the frontlines not policy makers in the power elite, many programs are specifically designed to reduce civilian casualties, and the Internet and a plethora of other technological advances now enjoyed in cyber-culture were once the products of military planned and funded projects” [2]. What can be drawn from these arguments then? Should games such as *Tactical Iraqi* and *Virtual Iraq* be stopped from production? The answers are subjective. Who is to say that these games are worsening the war in Iraq? While ideally, these games aim to reduce civilian casualties and allow for better informed soldiers, there is no testament of knowing the actual influences these games have in real life scenarios.

In a test sample of college students, none of the players actually played *Tactical Iraqi* for its intended purpose of teaching Arabic dialect. “The learners were generally reluctant to start playing the game, because they were afraid that they would not be able to communicate successfully with the non-player characters” [2]. These test subjects didn’t begin the actual objectives of the game until prompted to do so by the experimenters. Other test subjects were realizing that they could write down the Arabic phrases needed to complete the game, rather than learning the phrases and memorizing them as intended by the game developers. In a test sample of soldiers from the U.S. Army Special Forces, subjects quickly excelled at the game, even without the use of cheat sheets. Test samples of teenage civilians show their enthusiasm and involvement in the game. What can be realized from these studies is that though games may not have a huge influence on the general public, it does play a significant role in adolescent and teenage children. As children begin playing games such as *Tactical Iraqi*, or even other war and battle oriented games, they are inherently influenced by it. In a way, video games desensitize children to violence and war.

It is argued however that games like *Tactical Iraqi* are becoming a necessity in the status quo. By incorporating a sense of social realism, video games are creating a niche as a “mature aesthetic form and as an ethical expression of artistic communication and mass instruction” [2]. The lead director of the *Tactical Iraqi* project is a peace activist himself, and questioned the implications of beginning such a project. He states that he was overwhelmed by how unprepared soldiers appeared to be when being deployed in Iraq. Through this game, he hopes soldiers will learn the Arabic language and culture. Second, he stresses the importance of nonviolence over violence.

Entertainment-Education

Not all video games utilize violence in order to gain a fan base. As early as the 1980’s, Entertainment-Education has strived to use entertainment media as a teaching tool. A study conducted by Wong et al. at the University of Southern California measures the effectiveness of *serious games* [6] on one hundred undergraduate, non-science major test subjects. Serious games are defined as games that are created for a diverse number of users while containing content for education, government, health, military, science, and corporate training [6]. The study aimed to answer two questions: learning effects of interactivity (can deeper learning be attributed to interactive media versus non-interactive media), and the learning effects of both interactivity and media richness (can deeper learning be attributed to interactive media versus interactive hypertext).

Four different conditions were used to test the effect of video games on test subjects. Variables such as gender, video game literacy, and baseline knowledge in the area of interest were all controlled. The four conditions are defined as follows: game, replay, hypertext, and text. Test subjects in the game condition played the game once, and a replay of the game was generated for test subjects in the replay condition. Test subjects under the hypertext condition were able to navigate their way through a hypertext version of the game which included screenshots and actual narratives from the game. Test subjects under the text condition learned the material comparable to the form of textbooks. The effectiveness of these four test conditions were measured using multiple choice questions with ten correct and ten false items on vocabulary, processes, and cause-and-effect relations [6]. The game used in this test sample is *Malloman*, a game meant to teach physiology concepts.

Results showed that subjects under the game, replay, and hypertext conditions of the game all showed an increased knowledge gain in physiology. In addition, the text format condition was perceived to be less educational as opposed to the other three format conditions. Effects of media format on self-reported learning, gained interest in topic, and enjoyment, all showed the game format yielding a higher effect as opposed to text format. Hypertext format also yielded significant effect on test subjects, though not as much as game format.

While video games have always been perceived as a form of entertainment, these studies show that video games can be used in an educational setting. Video games are not only available in the form of personal enjoyment; video games are widely used throughout public school systems as a learning tool. Elementary schools have been known to use video games to teach young children various subjects such as math and English. Though video game violence will always remain an eminent issue in society, the study by Wong et al. shows us how video games can be used to benefit education even in undergraduate students. If we want to stop the dangerous influence

posed by the violence and other inappropriate contents from video games, we must realize it is not just the problem of just the developers, or the parents. It is only when everyone works together that we can find a solution and improve the environment in which the next generation of children grows up in.

Word Count

2,441

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