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40. The Video Game as an Object of Controversy

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The appearance of a new form of entertainment is often marked by multiple controversies. Like comic books and television before them, video games have had their share in the spotlight of social debates. As early offerings replicated existing games (like *PONG* or the Magnavox Odyssey *Volleyball* game) or were otherwise aiming at fostering social gatherings and expanding on the traditional idea of “playing”, they were perceived as digital embodiments of already-known phenomena, and thus did not generate anxieties or questionings, except for a few special cases, among which *Custer’s Revenge* features pre-eminently.¹

The other title of note is the very first video game to have sparked controversy: Exidy’s *Death Race* (1976), an arcade game based on Roger Corman’s film *Death Race 2000* (1975) starring David Carradine, Simone Griffeth and Sylvester Stallone. In the game, players had to drive cars so as to run over “gremlins” (which looked like human stick figures) to score points. When hit, a gremlin would disappear with a scream and was replaced by a tombstone. People found the “gremlins” indistinguishable from human characters, and the term “gremlins” was really just a euphemism coined by the developers to lessen the game’s questionable nature, since the game’s development title was *Pedestrian*. The fact that a video game asked a player –potentially a child– to engage in violence against ordinary people instead of monsters or spaceships, and that this violence took place in a realistic setting (inferred from the blocky graphics with the aid of the game’s title, cabinet artwork and so on, rather than portrayed directly using vivid imagery) caused a public outcry. Numerous protests and extensive media coverage gave *Death Race* extra publicity, but not enough to make it a success by any standard: as historian Steve Kent writes, “According to [Exidy founder’s Pete] Kauffman, Exidy sold only 1,000 *Death Race* machines, just a fraction of the number of *Sea Wolf* and *Gun Fight* machines Midway placed that same year.”²

In the later half of the 1980s, Nintendo and its “family-friendly” policy succeeded in marketing video games to children, thus prompting their thorough examination to ensure that they were appropriate recreation –or even better, learning tools– for kids. This led to the first wave of investigations, research, claims, counter-claims, and passionate speeches on the subject, the main results of which have entered popular culture and general knowledge.³ For most people, video games on the one hand developed hand-eye coordination, problem-solving skills and spatial navigation and comprehension in general, with some particular titles being capable of teaching classic subject matters like geography and history (as in such games as *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* and *Civilization*), and on the other hand video games were thought to be responsible for anti-social or increased aggressive behaviors, and health problems ranging from obesity

to epileptic seizures (as of 2007, many video games instruction manuals contain a warning that playing video games may trigger an epileptic seizure).⁴

Violence

The aforementioned case of *Death Race* had set the tone for video games' major source of moral debate: the increasingly detailed graphical depiction of violence. In 1992, Midway's *Mortal Kombat* went further down that road. Designed as a response to Capcom's very successful *Street Fighter 2*, the game attempted to attract notoriety with excessive, over-the-top content: characters would fly across the screen, throw fireballs, freeze their opponents or instantly teleport themselves, and eventually face a four-armed humanoid and a shape-shifting sorcerer. However, many found these features marginal, due to the exaggerated depiction of blood and gore, with simple jabs causing streams of blood to pour from the opponent's face or body. The one fighting game innovation that caused much of the controversy was the inclusion of gory "fatalities". When an opponent was beaten, instead of dropping to the ground, he or she stood up, stunned and incapable of doing anything. The winner could "finish off" the loser with any move of his choice, and had a few seconds to execute a special command. If done correctly, the character would dismember, incinerate, or behead his victim.

Unlike *Death Race*, more realistic graphics were one of the game's strengths. Instead of hand-drawing and animating the characters, the development team filmed real actors, digitized their performance as still photographs, and individually animated them. This made the extreme violence scandalous enough that in 1993 United States Senator Joseph Lieberman arranged a hearing on video games, which he claimed were marketing violence to kids.⁵ The hearings particularly focused on *Mortal Kombat* and the Sega CD game *Night Trap* (1992), chiefly because these two games featured digitized footage of actors and actresses. The main outcome of these hearings was the creation of the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), a self-regulatory body developed by the video game industry.

Numerous controversial games followed in the next years. Some titles deserving special mention include *Doom*, which popularized the First-Person Shooter (FPS) genre and was used by one of the boys responsible for the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, and the *Grand Theft Auto* series for bringing violence into a realistic contemporary urban setting and letting the player engage law enforcement officials, civilians, and even prostitutes with a wide array of weaponry.

Sexual Content

A relatively small and marginal production of erotic video games continued in the wake of *Custer's Revenge*, appearing not on video game consoles but rather on personal computers. The most famous of these is Sierra's *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards* (1987), an adventure game that would span five sequels by 1996 in which the player controlled a middle-aged loser desperately trying to have sex with various women. The visuals were still low-resolution due to the limited graphical power

of the time, and the games' main appeal resided in their humor. Aside from *Larry*, most games that featured sexual content or nudity consisted of electronic renditions of various strip-poker, pinball, mahjong, and puzzle games. The arrival of FMV technology in the 1990s meant that erotic and pornographic video games could now feature live-action videos of real actors and actresses, and a number of titles were produced to test the grounds of "adult interactive entertainment", *Riana Rouge* (1997) and *Michael Ninn's Latex* (1998) being among the higher-profile ones. Erotic video games should not be confused with "interactive adult videos", interactive software pioneered by Digital Playground's *Virtual Sex* series that also appeared in 1997, and are not formally "games".

From the late 1990s and onward, the growing popularity of the Internet coupled with the advent of accessible web-based development tools like Adobe Flash allowed the production of many erotic games, often by hobbyists, in the *hentai* style (a hand-drawn style popular in Japan) and often belonging to the "dating sim" genre. Pornographic and erotic video games have caused less controversy as they are not handled through any organized distribution channels as standard video games are, and much in the same way that amateur or webcam pornography does not appear side-by-side with mainstream cinema and blockbuster movies.

Rather, it is the presence of objectionable content in otherwise standard, widely distributed video games, that caused controversy in the mainstream media. *Night Trap* was one of the first titles to cause a stir for featuring a group of college-aged girls having a slumber party in a typical high-class suburban house. Under scrutiny during the Congress hearings mentioned earlier, the main content found offensive was that the player could let the girls die instead of saving them. The fact that some of them appeared in nightgowns or were otherwise scantily clothed, however, furthered the game's already precarious position. *Night Trap* was pulled from multiple stores in the U.S. who refused to be associated with it, but at the same time its sales increased dramatically thanks to the exposure it received. In the next two years, it was remade for multiple platforms and the ESRB rated it "Mature". *Phantasmagoria* followed in 1995 and took the controversy to another level with a simulated rape scene. Even though the camera did not film below waist level and the aggressor –the heroine Adrienne's husband– was clearly shown to be possessed by a demon, the game was banned in Australia and received adult ratings in Germany and the United Kingdom. In the U.S. the game was rated "Mature" by the ESRB and was not subjected to any particular treatment.

In the following years, Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* series caused stirs twice, the first time in 2001 with *Grand Theft Auto III* because the player could pick up a prostitute in his car and have sex with her, and in 2004 with *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* for the "hot coffee" incident which received considerable media coverage. In *GTA3* the sexual activity was not represented onscreen, the player only saw his car rocking back and forth for a time. In *San Andreas*, the player's girlfriend would ask him to come in her house "for some coffee", and the camera remained outside the house while some moaning sounds were heard from inside. However, the Rockstar developers had designed a mini-game to govern the intercourse, in which the player had to push buttons in rhythm to fill up an "excitement" bar eventually leading his girlfriend to orgasm in order to improve his

relationship with her. This content was disabled upon the game's release, but the data was left on the game disc. Players eventually made it available by modifying the program code for the PC version of the game and using third-party cheating devices for the console versions. As a result, the game had its Mature rating revised to Adults Only by the ESRB, and was pulled from many retailers' shelves in accordance with their policies. Rockstar later re-released the game with the "hot coffee" content removed, thus regaining its former rating.

The same principle of inaccessible, dormant content caused a similar controversy with Bethesda Softworks' *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006). While characters could not be undressed further than their underwear, some modders (people engaging in game modifications, often as a positive expression of creativity and with the goal of expanding their favorite games) found character art for topless women hidden away in the game data. They released a patch for unlocking it, and the game's rating was increased from Teen to Mature.

Ideology

Some games have also sparked controversy because of ideological implications seen as dangerous or subversive, or for the treating of sensitive subject matter. *JFK: Reloaded* (2004) put the player in the shoes of Lee Harvey Oswald, John F. Kennedy's alleged assassin, in order to re-enact the assassination attempt. The *Grand Theft Auto* series was condemned not only for sexual content but also for having the player live out a life of criminality. Rockstar's subsequent offering, *Bully* (2006; also known as *Canis Canem Edit* in the United Kingdom) similarly had the player becoming a troublemaker kid in a boarding school who is given the possibility of hitting other children, pulling pranks, and generally causing mischief. Additionally, the player's male character could kiss certain boys, in a manner similar to the way the male hero of Lionhead Studios' *Fable* (2004) could marry some men. At the other end of the spectrum, *America's Army* (2002) was developed by the U.S. army, explicitly to be used as a recruitment tool.

Rule of Rose (2006) had its release cancelled in the United Kingdom, and was subsequently banned in Australia. The game's story revolved around a 19-year old woman being captive to a cast of young, evil girls. David Charter of *The Times* reported that "The game puts the player in the shoes of a teenage girl who is repeatedly beaten and humiliated as she tries to break out of an orphanage. She is bound, gagged, doused with liquids, buried alive and thrown into the 'Filth Room'",⁶ a depiction that was rejected by Laurie Hall of the Video Standards Council, the organization that gave the game its original 16+ rating: "I have no idea where the suggestion of in-game sadomasochism has come from, nor children being buried underground. These are things that have been completely made up."⁷ And while Charter suggested that "Sony did not release *Rule of Rose* in the US for fears of an outcry, particularly over alleged overtones of lesbianism and sadomasochism", Hall declared that "There isn't any underage eroticism". Shuji Ishikawa, the game's director, thinks otherwise, as he said in an interview on *Gamasutra*: "There are definitely erotic parts to it, and some things that might make people

uncomfortable, but it's not the focus.”⁸ As the case of *Rule of Rose* demonstrates, most of the video game controversies spawned on grounds of ideology are highly subjective.

As games increasingly strive for photorealistic graphics and start exploring everyday, life-like environments instead of fantasy or science-fiction settings, controversies are bound to multiply.

Notes

1. *Custer's Revenge* was an infamous game developed and published by Mystique in 1982 for the Atari 2600 console. The player controlled a naked man running from a fort and through a plain, who had to dodge obstacles in order to reach a Native American woman tied to a pole and rape her. Predictably, the game caused controversy from all kinds of social groups and tarnished Atari's reputation, even though the latter had no involvement in this game.

2. See Steven L. Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games: The Story behind the Craze that Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*. New York City: Three Rivers Press, 2001, page 91.

3. See for instance Craig A. Anderson and Catherine M. Ford. 1986. “Affect of the Game Player: Short-Term Effects of Highly and Mildly Aggressive Video Games”, in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol.12, Issue 4, 1986, pages 390-402; Diana Gagnon, “Videogames and Spatial Skills: An Exploratory Study”, in *Educational Communication and Technology*, Vol. 33, Issue 4, 1985, pages 263-275; and Nicola S. Schutte, John M. Malouff, Joan C. Post-Gorden, and Annette L. Rodasta, “Effects of Playing Videogames on Children's Aggressive and Other Behaviors”, in *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol.18, Issue 5, 1988, pages 454-460.

4. See James W. Wheless, “Video Games and Epilepsy”, available online at http://www.epilepsy.com/info/family_kids_video.html (accessed March 9, 2007). The link between video games and epilepsy is still unclear and subject to research.

5. See Steven L. Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games: The Story behind the Craze that Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*, New York City: Three Rivers Press, 2001, pages 462-480.

6. See David Charter, “Torturing this child is a game too far, says appalled EU boss”, *The Times*, November 17, 2006. Available online at http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/article639508.ece (accessed March 19, 2007).

7. See Tim Ingham, “505 Games pulls Rule of Rose release”, *MCV: The interactive entertainment weekly*, November 24, 2006. Available online at

<http://www.mcvuk.com/news/24913/505-Games-pulls-out-of-Rule-Of-Rose-release> (accessed March 19, 2007).

8. See Brandon Sheffield, “Thank Heaven for Little Girls: Why *Rule of Rose* May Be 2006's Most Controversial Game”, *Gamasutra: The Art & Business of Making Games*, available online at http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20060607/sheffield_01.shtml (accessed March 19, 2007).

Further Reading

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