

As graphics become more convincing game developers and publishers have a social, moral and ethical responsibility to ensure that the games which they produce should not depict unnecessarily extreme and 'realistic' violence. Discuss.

Robert Leigh

In the modern day gaming industry there is always a demand for games which portray more realistic and lifelike scenarios. For example, the latest incarnation in Polyphony Digital's *Gran Turismo* series, for the Sony PlayStation consoles, features a range of over 50 different cars which have been modelled for hours to achieve a 3D version ingame which is 100% realistic in size, styling, colour and detail to the real vehicle. The realism surrounding the game extends inside the cars to working speedometers, odometers, working mirrors which show reflections, and even realistic car noises, which change, depending on which camera the player is using. However, there are little social, moral and ethical issues for publishers and developers to worry about in games of *Gran Turismo's* nature. First Person Shooter's (FPS') are where the majority of these issues lie, along with a number games with more non-linear gameplay, such as Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* series.

Violence can be part of the appeal of many video games, such as the *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty* series', however, video games do not have to include violence to become popular, and this is most evident in sports and driving games, as well as platform games, such as those which are part of Nintendo's extremely popular Mario franchise.

Research put together by Cragg et al, for the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), contains an interesting section on why violence is part of the appeal of some video games. First of all we must consider whether the actions in video games, which are technically violent actions, are considered violent by people. For example, Cragg et al (p57) describe the violence in *Lego Star Wars* as:

“characters that are shot disintegrate into their constituent bricks in a way that few people would regard as ‘violent’.”

This is where something which is technically classed as violence is presented in a way which reduces graphical violence to a level which some would consider more acceptable. This can be seen as the developers of the game considering the moral, social and ethical issues associated with violence when the first concept of the game was born, and throughout development. On the other hand however, without clarification from the developers and publishers themselves, the public will never know if these issues were thought about, or whether the idea was just considered as more realistic for the game. A lego character being shot and its corpse laying in a puddle of blood, to me, does not seem very realistic, or appealing. This kind of non violent violence is also evident in the *Mario* and *Sonic* series, Kent (2004) describes them defeating their enemies in a non-violent way:

“Mario and Sonic jump on enemies to make them disappear-a nebulous fate that may or may not involve death.”

This seemingly less violent way of defeating enemies makes these games appeal to a wide range of people as those who disagree with high levels of gore and blood will appreciate the lower level of

violence.

Comparing *Lego Star Wars* to *Manhunt 2*, which was refused a classification by the British Board of Film Classification(2007), on the ground of :

“unremitting bleakness and callousness of tone in an overall game context which constantly encourages visceral killing with exceptionally little alleviation or distancing. There is sustained and cumulative casual sadism in the way in which these killings are committed, and encouraged, in the game.”

It is clear here that the British Board of Film Classification feels that there are issues regarding violence in video games which need to be addressed. By refusing *Manhunt 2* a classification they are almost telling games developers and publishers that there is a responsibility on their part to contemplate the issues surrounding such violence.

Obviously, of course there are games which fall between these two extremes, and they fall here for a reason. The *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honour* series' both fall into the Entertainment Software Rating Board's (ESRB) 'Teen' category. Kent (2004) reveals that this is because

"These are straight World War II simulations, and the developers made a concerted decision not to include the more gratuitous injuries and other things that you might find depicted in an M-rated game."

These games are everywhere you look in the video games industry, mainly they are First Person Shooters, which cover a wide range of different settings, such as warfare settings, both classic and modern, in the aforementioned series', and the *Battlefield* series, or a more futuristic setting with *Halo*, or a slightly more fantasy world in *Far Cry*.

A video game series which has caused much controversy over the years is Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto*(GTA) series. The range of GTA games sees you take control of a character with which for one reason or another you rise through the criminal underworld. The series is seen by many who have not played it as excessively violent, mainly due to the belief that every action you undertake is one of a violent nature. This however is untrue, there is a high level of violence evident in each game, but the series is not based solely around violent behaviour. Alderman (2008) shares the view that 'outsiders', as it were, to the series see it horrifically violent:

“Mention the GTA series to non-gaming friends, though, and I will hear that it's horrifically violent, verging on pornographic, and that a majority of the gameplay is taken up with finding creative ways to murder prostitutes. “

Alderman (2008) also goes on to make the point that the GTA games are a series aimed towards adults, and not impressionable youths, who may take the context of the violence in the wrong way. This is where parents are responsible for the ethical, moral and social issues surrounding the violence. Video Games, like films, are classified so that violence is not available to those who are impressionable, but parents must help to reinforce this by not simply buying their child the latest must have film of video game, when it has a classification above their child's age.

A number of gamers questioned in the study by Cragg et al(2007) agreed that the violence was needed to make the game more realistic and life like, and that for certain games, such as '*Medal of Honour*', they would not be made if this violence was not allowed, which is true. The Cragg et al (2007,p59) study also showed that the majority of gamers questioned knew about the gore, or blood levels in the options menu. Many games now incorporate an option in their menu which allows the user to change the level of gore in the game, the levels are usually similar, 'off', 'normal/medium', or 'high'.

“Unreal Tournament... On the options there's blood and you can have it completely off, medium, or high. On medium only a tiny drop of blood comes out if you shoot them, whereas on high, if you shoot them a lot loads more blood comes out. If you shoot them with something big like a rocket launcher or something then they actually blow up and you see all their guts flying. Sometimes bits of guts bounce on the ceiling. I put it at high, and probably everyone does.”

“But it's computer characters and they don't really resemble people.”

This can be argued that the developers and publishers are already taking steps to address the issues involved with violence in games, by allowing the user to choose the level of gore that they see throughout their game play. By doing this the developers are allowing the freedom to have realistic violence if the user wishes, or, for the violence to be minimal if the user, or a parent believes that they should not be exposed to such violence. The second part of this quote shows the way in which gamers relate to actions which take place in a game, and how they understand that it is separate from real life and that actions taken in game cannot happen in real life, even if some actions in real life can be replicated in game.

This point about actions and events happening in game play being recognised as unacceptable in real life, by gamers, is backed up by another gamer questioned in Cragg et al's (2007) study:

“If you get Gran Turismo, for example, you are getting a powerful sports car and driving round the racetrack smashing into the barriers and things. I wouldn't do that in real life. You can enjoy yourself and you know there's no harm going to come to you.”

“You can do whatever you want and there is no consequences.”

The gamer interviewed here clearly realises that what happens in games must stay in games, and they can relate to why this should be. If gamers recognise that the kind of behaviour acceptable in games can be unacceptable in real life then it becomes easier for games developers and programmers to progress with their games, as levels of violence included would not need to be questioned as much.

Cragg et al's (2007) study captures a number of gamers who agree with this view, that in games there are different rules, than in the real world, and common sense tells you that events in games should not be replicated in real life just because they can:

“It's better in a game because you can actually do it (be violent) whereas in a film you are just watching it. But I wouldn't want to actually go out and do it for real.”

In the article by Kent(2004) the director of *Twisted Metal* tries to explain why violence and gore are necessary within certain computer games:

“it's not as simple as shooting someone and simply not having any blood. The Medal of Honor games do this. I love those games, but without the blood, they just don't have visceral impact. They feel watered down.”

This is an extremely valid point, the blood, gore and violence add to the realism, and make the game seem more complete, and help to draw the user into the game and feel more involved in the gameplay. If games didn't make the user feel involved then it would mean that the gamers would complain about the lack of realism, and lack of ability to draw the gamer into the game and storyline. This would then ultimately lead to the game being a failure and a massive loss for the developers and publishers.

Contrary to the widely shared view that violent video games are a negative impact on children is that which was risen by a 2006 government study. In his brief article for the Guardian Hinliff (2006) reveals that the study 'found no proof that even violent games triggered aggressive behaviour'.

Murder is violence, no matter what form it comes in, be it a merciless assassination, a war battle, or being jumped on, yet it is seemingly only unacceptable when someone deems it as too realistic. But realism is exactly what the consumer is asking for, with the advances made in graphical processing power consumers are constantly asking for games and films which contain realism to a degree where it is almost life like, yet when violence and gore is added these same consumers complain about the violence being too realistic.

In conclusion I believe that to a certain extent video games developers and publishers have a social, moral and ethical responsibility to ensure their games do not contain unnecessary violence, however, there is a reason that organizations such as Pan European Game Information(PEGI) and the British Board of Film Classification exist, and this is to classify games and therefore regulate violence in video games, and other media. Some responsibility must also lie with the parents of children who own, or wish to own games which may contain questionable violence, and they should not allow their children to be exposed to those games, if they believe the violence is in excess.

References

Alderman, N., (2008), *An orgy of violence? Not quite...*, [online], The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/apr/29/games> , [Accessed 15th January 2009]

British Board of Film Classification (2007), *BBFC Rejects Video Game Manhunt 2*, [online], British Board of Film Classification, <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/news/press/20070619.html>, [Accessed 15th January 2009]

Cragg, A., Dawson, C.R., Taylor, C., Toombs, B. 'Violence as an element in the appeal of video games', Video Games – Research to improve understanding of what players enjoy about their video games, and to explain their preferences for particular games, p57-62.

Hinsliff, G., (2006) *Study downplays link of video games to violence*, [online], The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2006/may/21/news.games>, [Accessed 15th January 2009]

© 2008
Robert Leigh

Bibliography

Alderman, N., (2008), *An orgy of violence? Not quite...*, [online], The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/apr/29/games> , [Accessed 15th January 2009]

Anderson, C., A., (2003), *Violent Video Games: Myths, Facts, and Unanswered Questions*, [online], American Psychology Association, <http://www.apa.org/science/psa/sb-anderson.html> [Accessed 15th January 2009]

British Board of Film Classification (2007), *BBFC Rejects Video Game Manhunt 2*, [online], British Board of Film Classification, <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/news/press/20070619.html>, [Accessed 15th January 2009]

Cragg, A., Dawson, C.R., Taylor, C., Toombs, B. 'Violence as an element in the appeal of video games', *Video Games – Research to improve understanding of what players enjoy about their video games, and to explain their preferences for particular games*, p57-62.

Hinsliff, G., (2006) *Study downplays link of video games to violence*, [online], The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2006/may/21/news.games>, [Accessed 15th January 2009]

Kent, S. L., (2004) *Manhunt to Mortal Kombat: The Use and Future Use of Violence in Games*, [online], Gamasutra, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2133/manhunt_to_mortal_kombat_the_use_.php, [Accessed 15th January 2009]

Markkula Centre for Applied Ethics (2005) *Video Gaming: Playing With Ethics? Unavoidable Ethical Questions About Video Gaming*, [online], Santa Clara University, <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/submitted/video-games.html>, [Accessed 15th January 2009]

Walsh, D., *Video Game Violence and Public Policy* , [online], University of Chicago, <http://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/conf2001/papers/walsh.html>, [Accessed 15th January 2009]