

Should guidelines be created for video game developers to refer to when portraying suicide and/or depression?

COMP230 - Ethics and Professionalism

1706966

November 13, 2018

1 Introduction

With depression being a common illness worldwide, affecting more than three hundred million people and close to eight hundred thousand people dying due to suicide every year[1], all avenues that can help to diminish this problem should be explored. This paper takes a look into what possible effects could be seen if guidelines were created for the video game industry to consider when portraying suicide and/or depression in video games.

In severe cases, depression can lead to suicide. In the U.S it is estimated that 60% of people who commit suicide are suffering with severe depression[2], this link gives additional reasoning to look at both suicide and depression for the guidelines. Suicide is the leading cause of death among young people aged 20-34 years in the UK[3], with about 29%[4] of the 2.2 billion[5] people playing video games falling around that age group. Working to ensure video

games are not causing a negative mental health effect could have a large impact on the number of people suffering.

2 Current Guidelines

Pan European Game Information (PEGI) don't have a label to warn of the depiction of suicide or depression in video games[6]. The reason PEGI labels exist is to warn parents and players of what is in the game. With a warning for depression/suicide being missed it shows how little this issue has been considered.

Currently there are no guidelines specific to the video game industry in regards to how suicide and depression are handled in video games. Popularised guidelines do exist for portraying suicide in the news[7][8] and drama adaptations[9].

The drama adaptation guidelines match best with a video game environment as both generally show fictional scenes. However due to the artistic style, interactivity and immersion of video games it would be best to form guidelines more specific to the industry.

3 Impact

A systematic review[10] has shown evidence of the reporting and portrayal of suicidal behaviour to have a negative effect and facilitate suicide among viewers. Conversely video games have been proven to be able to cause positive health-related behaviour change[11], these video games were designed specifically to facilitate positive behaviour changes. With this information in mind, it is logical to expect that when video games portray suicidal behaviour without consideration to its effects on the viewer, we could likely see similar negative effects to that stated in the aforementioned review[10].

4 Controversy

5 Industry Guideline History

6 Conclusion

References

- [1] W. H. Organization, “Depression: Fact sheets,” accessed on 2018-11-06. [Online]. Available: <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression>
- [2] L. Holmes, “Suicide rates in the u.s.” accessed on 2018-11-12. [Online]. Available: <https://www.verywellmind.com/suicide-rates-overstated-in-people-with-depression-2330503>
- [3] mentalhealth.org, “Suicide a-z,” accessed on 2018-11-12. [Online]. Available: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/suicide>
- [4] D. Sales and U. Data, “Essential facts about the computer and video game industry,” 2018.
- [5] E. McDonald, “Newzoos 2017 report,” 2017, accessed on 2018-11-12.
- [6] PEGI, “Pegi labels,” accessed on 2018-11-12. [Online]. Available: <https://pegi.info/what-do-the-labels-mean>
- [7] W. H. Organization *et al.*, “Preventing suicide: a resource for media professionals, update 2017,” 2017.
- [8] J. Nepon, S. Fotti, L. Y. Katz, and J. Sareen, “Media guidelines for reporting suicide,” *Canadian Psychiatric Association Position Paper*, vol. 5, 2009.
- [9] Samaritans, “Drama portrayal: Fact sheets,” accessed on 2018-11-06.

[Online]. Available: https://www.samaritans.org/sites/default/files/kcfinder/files/Factsheet_drama%20portrayal%20Feb16%20web.pdf

- [10] J. Pirkis and R. W. Blood, *Suicide and the media: a critical review*. Mental Health and Special Programs Branch, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2001.
- [11] T. Baranowski, R. Buday, D. I. Thompson, and J. Baranowski, "Playing for real: video games and stories for health-related behavior change," *American journal of preventive medicine*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 74–82, 2008.