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

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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 of showing suicide/depression

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 Will the industry consult new guidelines

The video games industry has been known to ignore guidelines until the guidances become law. A prime example of this is the presence of game accessibility guidelines. With a large amount of guidelines existing for years now[12][13] there was still a drive in research to push forward the issue of accessibility to be brought into law[14]. The fact that this push to create laws forcing the industry to work on the accessibility of their games, proves that without enforcement through legal manners the change throughout the industry is likely to be lacklustre. However starting out by creating guidelines has shown to be a good start, some games did follow the guidelines, a great example of these can be shown by viewing the winners of AbleGamers awards[15]. There is a strong argument that the availability of guidelines existing also helped to show how important of an issue accessibility in games was when fighting to have laws implemented.

A major factor that may sway the industry in how they receive new guidelines, is that games are often being seen as an art form[16]. There is a worry that developers will consider the guidelines to be restrictive making them unlikely to consult the guidelines. For guidelines to stand a chance of being accepted it is vastly important that they can given accurate credibility. To provide credibility to the guidelines they will need to be based entirely on evidence, additionally they should be created with collaboration between researchers, public health policy makers and game development industry experts[17]. Lastly and arguably the trickiest way to provide credibility to the guidelines is to prove that they work.

6 Do guidelines have a positive impact?

Collaboration between researchers and journalists limiting reporting of subway suicides was followed by a reduction in the number of suicides using that method[18], showing evidence that withholding details about suicide methods at least lowers the amount that method is used. Researchers recorded a drop in suicide rates following the introduction of the Australian media guidelines[19], helping to solidify the argument that well made guidelines have a positive effect on the public.

7 Conclusion

It is obvious from the discussion of this paper that guidelines can have a place in helping to steer the creation of content to a more positive impact on end users. The fact that no guidelines exist for video game developers in regards to portraying suicide and/or depression is a great oversight, and certainly goes to show how under represented this issue is. Guidelines created to fill this gap stand a good chance of not being taken on board by many developers, but will have a positive effect when they are referred to, assuming they are steeped in credibility. Once guidelines have been available for a while further research can be done to consider if the industry has seen any changes in how they represent suicide/depression and any effects this has caused, to either the end user or the industry itself.

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