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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Steve Rabin. *Introduction to Game Development.*
ISBN-13: 978-1-58450-377-4
ISBN-10: 1-58450-377-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Introduction to game development / edited by Steve Rabin.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-1-58450-377-4
ISBN-10: 1-58450-377-7
1. Computer games—Design. 2. Computer games—Programming. 3. Video games—Design. I. Rabin, Steve.
QA76.76.C672158 2005
794.8'1536—dc22 2005007512

Printed in the United States of America
07 7 6 5 4 3

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Introduction to Game Development

Edited by Steve Rabin

CHARLES RIVER MEDIA

Boston, Massachusetts

1.2 Games and Society

In This Chapter

Overview

Twenty years ago, the study of video games might have been greeted with scorn or derision. After all, who would have considered simplistic games like *Pong* and *Breakout* anything more than a novelty? At most, they were perceived as primitive extensions of board and card games. However, in the two plus decades since then, what was seen as a mildly diversionary collection of dots on a TV screen has become a cultural phenomenon of massive proportions and certainly one worth examining in greater detail.

Clearly, the enormous fiscal and cultural success of video and computer games is too long-lived to be a fluke or fad. The presumption has to be that they fulfill some social or personal need, and that this fulfillment has enabled their enduring success. However, what is this social or personal need, and what power does it have? Are video games merely a reflection of culture and society, or do they exert undue influence on

that culture and society? Surely, the answer is somewhere in between, but the answer to this question is critical in determining how societies reconcile their relationships with video games. Are they to be feared or embraced? What laws, if any, should regulate them? Are children or adults susceptible to violent content within video games? How do particular societies and cultures view games and react to their content, and how does that change when that game has been produced by a different culture or society?

Moreover, the classification of video games can be a tricky business. Clearly, they are intended to be entertainment, but what kind of entertainment? Are they an art form, like paintings or literature? Or are they an entertainment medium like television or movies? Are they to be considered an activity or sport, like tennis or ping-pong, because of their capability to sharpen reflexes and improve hand-eye coordination? Or does the interactive nature of the gaming experience require a new classification? Whatever the classification, do video games constitute speech, and thus fall subject to the protections and laws governing speech? How should a society reconcile these very different portrayals of video games? While consumers, lawmakers, and judges hammer out these thorny issues, society keeps humming along, and the consumption and integration of video games into daily life continues, often creating or highlighting newer and thornier issues.

At the extreme of this absorption into daily life is the phenomenon of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) such as *EverQuest* or *Lineage*. The nature of these games is such that they can be remarkably immersive and time consuming. Because of this, within these MMOGs, video games and society combine to form a completely new environment with its own unique cultural flavor and its own set of societal rules. People will play, chat, cooperate, compete, and argue with other humans in a place that knows no borders or time zones. No study of games and society could be complete without the acknowledgment and study of how these societies form and operate, and the view that this "blank slate" provides into the inner workings of more traditional societies.

Why Do People Play Video Games?

An examination of this question could easily fill a book, and, in fact, UCLA psychology professor Patricia Marks Greenfield wrote a book in 1984 that addresses it, amongst others [Green01]. Her approach was anthropological in nature because research into this emerging field was nearly nonexistent at the time. In *Mind and Media: The Effects of Television, Video Games, and Computers*, she concluded that video games are appealing to people, in part, because they provide real-time gameplay, goals, and stages. Additionally, they encourage communication by facilitating cooperation. Even this very brief summary of her work yields some important insights. As the games themselves have evolved, however, the concept of these fundamental appealing elements should evolve as well. Greenfield anticipated these potential changes by suggesting that every game will offer different things to different players in terms of their appeal. In this spirit, "real-time gameplay" will be expanded to "real-time interaction," and "facilitating cooperation" will be expanded to "facilitating community." These expanded elements and their varied implementations provide a basis for the rest of this chapter.

Audience and Demographics

At this point, it is useful to determine who in society is playing games and how this information is known. While video games are ostensibly about fun and entertainment, every published video game is, at its core, a business venture designed to make money. As such, it is targeted toward a particular audience or demographic. The demographics within a society can guide what kinds of games are financially feasible to produce. For example, in the late 1990s, several game development companies were created to capitalize on what was seen as a rapidly emerging preteen female market, despite evidence that only a small percentage of these individuals had previously sought out video games aimed at their age group and gender. Unfortunately for these companies, they could not grow the demographic and were forced to close doors after conceding that there wasn't a viable market there.

However, sometimes it is possible to create a new video game genre and thus capture a previously unknown or untapped demographic. In 1997, the game *Deer Hunter* showed that it was possible to make game players out of people who normally did not play games. This game was produced exclusively for Wal-Mart, at their request. Wal-Mart understood the demographics of their customers and was confident that there would be demand for a hunting game that ran on lower-end computers. The game was developed in a mere three months and went on to sell several million copies and spawn a whole genre of hunting games. For a short time, the games industry was baffled and dumbfounded, but came to accept the new demographic.

Demographics can give you the broad strokes of who is out there buying and playing games. Of course, there will be exceptions (the soccer mom who plays nothing but first-person shooters), but, in general, demographics can show informative trends. For instance, a broad brushstroke view of gamers indicates that games with cute, cartoony images tend to be geared toward children. If a game features violent gameplay or sexual innuendos in the context of cute, fuzzy creatures, there might be some demographic issues.

Interestingly, this exact situation occurred in 2001 with the Nintendo 64 game *Conker's Bad Fur Day*. The UK company that developed the game, Rare, originally designed a cute, harmless platform game centered on a bushy-tailed squirrel named Conker. An early version of the game was demonstrated at a trade event, but the press angrily derided the developer for making another happy-go-lucky children's game. As a result, the team at Rare took the criticism to heart and retooled the game to make it adult-oriented; however, they retained the main character and the cartoonish style. Using English wit, sexual innuendos, and a gratuitous amount of toilet humor, the final game spoofed such R-rated movies as *The Terminator*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Godfather*, *Reservoir Dogs*, and *The Matrix*. In one of the most demented gameplay moments, the player would direct Conker to drink from a beer keg so that he could then urinate on fire demons. While the game was applauded by critics for being extremely innovative and well done, the cartoony main character failed to appeal to an older demographic and sales were dismal. In the end, Nintendo also had to go to

considerable effort to ensure that parents did not accidentally purchase the game for someone under 17. By an odd twist of fate, Nintendo later sold the development company Rare to Microsoft, and now a remake of the game, *Conker: Live and Reloaded*, is scheduled to appear on the Xbox (which has a considerably older demographic than the Nintendo 64).

Understanding what (beyond some very basic elements) will appeal and be desirable to particular demographics and societies can be tricky. Demographics research is one tool that can shed light on how a society uses and interacts with games. It also provides answers to the question of who within society is currently playing games.

The Entertainment Software Association

Where can demographic data be found? The Entertainment Software Association, which is comprised of many leading gaming industry companies and professionals, performs a yearly survey of representative U.S. households to determine gaming and purchasing habits [ESA04]. These numbers provide some insight into who is buying and playing video games.

ESA Statistics for the United States in 2003

- The average game player's age is 29.
- The average game buyer's age is 36.
- 39 percent of gamers are women.
- 40 percent of online game players are women.
- 54.7 percent of online casual game players are women.
- 50 percent of all Americans play video games.

While it's important to remember that these are generalities of a particular market (U.S.) during a particular year, it is remarkable that 50 percent of all Americans play video games. Markets do fluctuate, and certainly, the statistics were very different five years before this survey, but just as certainly, video games have achieved great mainstream acceptance within society. Also of note is that while video games have typically been targeted toward a male audience, clearly games must now target a healthy mix of genders to truly reach the mass market. Massively multiplayer online games (a fairly recent and popular addition to the market) have been particularly adept at providing compelling entertainment for both males and females.

ESRB

The Entertainment Software Rating Board [ESRB04], a self-regulatory body created in 1994 for the interactive software industry by the ESA, provides ratings for video games much like the Motion Picture Association of America provides ratings for movies. Recently, they've significantly expanded their ratings system, so in addition to a rating geared toward ages (EC for Early Childhood, E for Everyone, T for Teen, M for Mature, and AO for Adults Only), they've provided Content Descriptors to describe particular kinds of activity in games, as well as more specifics on the kinds of violence a game may

contain (e.g., Cartoon Violence, Mild Violence, Violence). An ESRB rating, while technically voluntary, is always required by console manufactures, the majority of game publishers, and most large retail stores within the United States.

More 2003 ESRB Statistics

- 57 percent of all games rated received an E for Everyone rating.
- 32 percent of all games rated received a T for Teen rating.
- 10 percent of all games rated received an M for Mature rating.
- 1 percent of all games rated received an EC for Early Childhood rating.
- In 2003, 70 percent of the top 20 best-selling console games were rated E or T, while 90 percent of the top 20 best-selling computer games were rated either E or T.

So, how does one interpret the ESRB and ESA data? Does the fact that 57 percent of all games were rated E mean that these are necessarily the most popular games, or just the most frequently made? The *Grand Theft Auto* series of games is a huge success—despite its M for Mature rating. Of course, looking at the average age of game buyers from the ESA data (36 years old) versus the average age of game players (29 years old), one might reasonably conclude that parents make up a significant portion of the game-buying public. Consequently, of course, games are going to be made to appeal to everyone from the young to the old.

Societal Reaction to Games

Societal reaction to games is often not favorable. Even given the $7 billion the industry experienced in sales in 2003, there is a prevailing idea that games are just kid stuff. Even gaming industry professionals, pulling down close to six-figure salaries, have a difficult time explaining what they do for a living to those not in the industry (fighting the idea that all they do is play games all day). Clearly, the numbers support the fact that it's primarily adults buying and playing games, but there are significant issues that arise because of this perception of games as child's play.

In addition, violence in video games has garnered an incredible amount of attention because of concerns with youth violence. As with television and movies, parents are concerned with their children being exposed to violent images in video games. Throw several school shootings (where the assailants were known to play video games) into the mix, and the perception is formed that games are detrimental to children in our society. Is this perception well deserved or unfair? If part of the popularity of games is because they have goals and stages, what happens when those goals and stages are violent in nature?

Legal Issues

An exhaustive history of controversial video games is beyond the scope of this chapter (and has been done very well on the Web in at least two places: an article on the Gamespot Web site [Gonzalez03] and one by University of Bucknell computer science

student Jason Yu [Yu01]). However, a few "notorious" games spurred Congress or community to action, and we'll briefly survey some of them here.

In 1992, Sega released a game called *Night Trap* to a largely unaware public. The game, likely destined for the bargain bin on its own merits, gained a certain celebrity for its "mature" content. Although the game featured nothing more controversial than your average B-grade movie, it was pulled from stores. In the game, you were tasked with saving the lives of five coeds living in a house haunted by vampires (and not cast in the role of the killer as was often mistakenly reported). Through a series of closed-circuit cameras, you were able to view events in the house, spring traps on the vampires, and catch the occasional lingerie pillow fight. Certainly, the game achieved notoriety far beyond what was warranted by the crude gameplay and vaguely titillating content.

Segue to another 1992 game called *Mortal Kombat*. Between its gruesome "fatalities" and the virtual gouts of blood, this fighting game was notable for its gameplay, but notorious for its quasi-realistic depictions of violence. While the arcade debut didn't garner much negative attention, the decision to bring it into the home shined a harsh spotlight on the game.

As a reaction to games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap*, Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-Connecticut) started hearings in late 1993 to call the video games industry on the carpet. The ultimatum to video game manufacturers was delivered: regulate yourselves or the government will do it for you. Lieberman, joined in March 1994 by Senator Herbert Kohl (D-Wisconsin), held a meeting attended by top video game officials where video game companies presented the senators with a 12-point plan for self-regulation. This was the birth of the ESRB.

In late 1994, another game destined for notoriety was created in Texas by (now legendary) id Software. The game *Doom* featured fast-paced action as you wandered around a demon-infested space station destroying the zombified former occupants (as well as various hell-spawned monsters) with a variety of armaments littering the hallways. It, and its predecessor, *Wolfenstein 3D*, were some of the earliest entries into the first-person shooter genre of games. It was a hugely successful game, and was one of the first to popularize a method of distribution where the first "chapter" of the game was free and players purchased the game only if they wanted to play the subsequent two chapters. It skated by the 1993–1994 hearings without mention, but was the subject of controversy a few years later.

On April 20, 1999, one of the most devastating school shootings in U.S. history occurred at Columbine High School, just west of Denver, Colorado. The two teenage gunmen were known to play *Doom*. Once more, video games were at the forefront of controversy. Several lawsuits followed, against id Software and other video game companies, alleging that their games had influenced the two perpetrators. Since then, all lawsuits have been dropped [AP0302].

Finally, another game that has been the focus of legal issues is Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. Set in Miami, this first-person action/adventure game puts you in the role of a lackey driver for the mob. A sequel to the equally controversial *Grand Theft Auto III*, the game's innovative brand of gameplay has made it a huge success.

The game series is not without its detractors, however. In November 2003, the Haitian Centers Council and Haitian Americans for Human Rights, two Haitian-American rights groups, protested the game in New York City. In *Vice City*, during one of the missions, the player is instructed to "Kill the Haitians." The context of the game places this in the midst of a gang battle between a Cuban gang and a Haitian gang, where to score points with one gang, you are to eliminate members of the other. In early December 2003, Rockstar announced that they would remove the offending line from the game. This didn't really quell the controversy, however, when in January 2004 a Federal case against Rockstar Games, Take-Two Interactive, Sony, Wal-Mart, Microsoft, Best Buy, and Target was dropped, only to be taken up again in a Florida court where the plaintiff group, headed by the Haitian-American Coalition of Palm Beach County, hoped to get a more stringent ruling than they would by leaving it at the Federal level.

Finally, in the year 2000, in the state of Missouri, a St. Louis County ordinance was passed that regulated access of video games in the home and arcades. The ESA (then called the Interactive Digital Software Association) filed a lawsuit in response. In April 2002, Senior U.S. District Judge Stephen N. Limbaugh rejected the Association's argument [AP0402]. After viewing gameplay from *Resident Evil*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Doom*, and *Fear Factor*, he wrote in his decision, "This court reviewed four different video games and found no conveyance of ideas, expression, or anything else that could possibly amount to speech. The court finds that video games have more in common with board games and sports than they do with motion pictures." The 8th Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis eventually overturned the decision stating, "Whether we believe the advent of violent video games adds anything of value to society is irrelevant; guided by the first amendment, we are obliged to recognize that 'they are as much entitled to the protection of free speech as the best of literature'" [USDCOA03].

Games and Youth Violence

As you will have noticed, most of the legal battles and threatened legislation in these few, brief examples revolved around fears about the potential effects of violent video games on youth. Is this a reasonable concern? What are the effects of violent video games on children? That's a tricky question, as often anecdotal or skewed evidence is pointed to as definitive.

In the same St. Louis court case mentioned previously, an amicus scholars' brief was filed by 33 media scholars, games researchers, historians, and psychologists. The scholars' brief quoted British psychologist Guy Cumberbatch, who claimed that it was puzzling that anyone could look at the research evidence and be so confident and passionate that harm was caused by the violence on television, film, and video games. While tests of statistical evidence are important, Cumberbatch worried they were being used to torture the data until it confessed to something that could secure publication in a scientific journal. He further claimed that lynch mob mentality has surrounded the debate on media violence with almost any evidence used to prove guilt [FEP02]. There are studies that point to such things as heightened heart rates after

playing violent video games or watching violent television programs or movies, but these studies also point to those physical effects quickly fading. If the amicus scholars' brief is correct, then clearly, more thoughtful research needs to be done to determine the effects of violent video games on children.

It begs the question: What exactly is violence as portrayed in video games? Does a violent action correspond exactly with what would be considered a violent action in society? There are many games for children where the on-screen character hits other characters or is hit in cartoonlike fashion, and they are largely not considered violent. Games that depict just the strategic elements of war in *Risk*-like fashion are largely not considered violent either, although war is, by its very nature, unavoidably violent. Is whether an action is violent or not determined in some sense by the realism of the depiction? How does this change over time? Games like *Mortal Kombat* were controversial for their "realistic" depictions of blood, but that 1992 depiction is now laughable compared to any modern depiction of blood.

Root of All Evil, or Good, Old-Fashioned Fun?

On the one hand, the argument by one St. Louis judge concludes that games don't constitute speech (much less protected speech), while on the other hand, the fear in violent games is that they are essentially indoctrinating our youth into violent behavior. Is there a disconnect there, in the idea that games are simultaneously seen as meaningless entertainment, and yet as a source of potentially violent behavior? These arguments would seem opposed to each other, for wouldn't games have to be more than meaningless entertainment to have a lasting effect? If a game currently considered speech is stripped of elements one by one (art, story, gameplay, sound, etc.), which element or elements would need to be stripped away to not consider it speech anymore? Moreover, at what point would it not be able to be considered a game anymore? How would that change depending on the culture you were in, and their particular values?

Cultural Issues

Cultural issues are an important consideration during game creation. Things that may be commonplace in one culture can have an entirely different connotation in another culture. If a game is going for a global release versus a domestic release, many things might have to be changed to appeal to or even simply not offend another culture. Even within a culture, there might be people in an intended demographic who don't get the in-jokes, or find the content of a game outright offensive. It's not always clear from the outset what these issues might be, either. History can provide important guideposts in this area, while not necessarily providing all the answers.

Worst . . . Stereotype . . . Ever

Humor is subjective, as anyone who's listened to eggnog-inspired, bad holiday jokes can tell you, and some cultures are a little more sensitive to depictions within games

than others (as evidenced by the Haitian-American response to *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*). Sometimes, when a cultural stereotype is played for humorous effect, the effects may just not hit everyone's funny bone. It's easy to rationalize it away or say, "Well, they just don't get the joke," but a significant uproar can have detrimental effects on a games sales and community standing.

See the case of the 1997 3D Realms game *Shadow Warrior* and its humorously (but perhaps insensitively) named hero "Lo Wang." The game was riddled with send-ups of cultural stereotypes and rife with politically incorrect references. The Japanese-American community didn't appreciate the lampooning of their culture, and didn't see it as the good-natured jab it was intended to be. Sales for the game weren't huge, and the controversy didn't last long, but it could be argued that the culture that might have found the most fun with the game was offended instead of amused.

Even the TV show *The Simpsons*, which has a long history of poking fun at literally everything and everyone, got in some trouble when Bart pretended to have Tourette's Syndrome in one episode. *The Simpsons* has had umpteen years with millions and millions of viewers to build a strong case of being an equal-opportunity offender to all creeds, cultures, races, and religions. However, games don't have that long to establish exactly where they stand, and it can be dangerous and insensitive to be seen as singling out one culture for ridicule.

Foreign Diplomacy

A global release brings its own set of issues. Games can be banned outright in some countries for seemingly arbitrary reasons, sometimes even after great lengths have been taken to be culturally sensitive to that specific country. Other times, a game that would seem on its face to be offensive to a particular country can be a huge success, leaving befuddled producers and marketers scratching their heads.

Germany

Germany, sensitive to its past, has stringent regulations on the violent content in its video games. In Germany, there exists a list called *the index* or banned list. With restrictions more stringent than most other European countries (or most countries in general), many violent video games have some hoops to jump through upon German release. Some games can avoid being placed on the list by changing a few controversial elements (red blood to green blood, for example). Games depicting Nazi iconography have avoided the list by switching those images to less controversial ones. In cases like *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (where in addition to changing the Nazi flags to a generic symbol, a Nazi song played by a phonograph within the game was changed to a piece of classical music), that may not be enough, and the game may be placed on the index despite extensive measures taken to be sensitive to the culture. Ultimately, a banned list game cannot be advertised, displayed in stores, or be sold to people under 18, which can make a game incredibly hard to market and sell.

China

China has a long history of banning video games as well. In May 2004, the 2002 PC game *Hearts of Iron* by Swedish company Paradox was banned by China's Ministry of Culture for "distorting history and damaging China's sovereignty and territorial integrity" [CD04]. In part, the game supposedly misrepresented historical facts regarding Japan, Germany, and Italy's participation in World War II. In addition, the game made "Manchuria," "West Xinjiang," and "Tibet" sovereign countries in the in-game maps. All of these are big no-nos according to China's gaming and Internet service regulations. As a result, Web sites were prohibited from releasing the game, sellers were prohibited from selling the game (under threat of legal punishment), and all CD-ROM copies of the game were to be confiscated. This is just one example from a very long list.

Japan

While Japan has in the past banned games for sexual content, and, in general, they eschew the more violent games, a recent game caused a curious reaction. EA's *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* depicts, among other things, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The game covers the Pacific campaign of World War II from 1941–1945. The player's basic goal, as outlined on EA's Web page, is to "stop Japanese forces from achieving control of the Pacific Theatre." The game sold 200,000 copies in Japan in its first two weeks. The game did a good job of depicting nonstereotyped Japanese soldiers as real human beings in an armed conflict, but still, one wouldn't necessarily expect a game depicting this particular conflict to be a huge success in Japan. Japanese gamers were unconcerned with the idea that they were killing their grandfathers, and concentrated instead on the gameplay.

Cultural Acceptance

It's not a simple thing to make clear-cut rules about what will find acceptance within others' cultures. Sometimes, the preemptive tailoring of a game to a specific culture's mores helps, and sometimes it doesn't. Certain cultures will ban a game specifically for a depiction of history that disagrees with what they believe; others will ignore culturally sensitive issues in favor of strong gameplay. Cultural sensitivity is a minefield, where only the strongest instances of offense are clearly problematic.

Society within Games

Take any subset of society and you'll see much of what that superset of that society has to offer—the good, the bad, and the ugly of human behavior, if you will.

Online Behavior: The Good

The hugely popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMPORPG) *EverQuest* has seen many different kinds of behavior since its release in 1999. One phenomenon of note, though, is *EverQuest* Weddings, where characters "wed" other

characters in online ceremonies (complete with virtual food, drink, and avatars of their virtual friends). In some ways, this might seem to represent stunted social interaction, but that would be a somewhat pessimistic view. It can be seen as representing the natural culmination of society—the joining of people together in bonds that, to the people involved, can be serious and genuine. What can be better than the mutual expression of love between two people, virtual or otherwise? Societally speaking, we are built around that very premise.

Online Behavior: The Bad

Online play is not always representative of the best society has to offer, though. More serious than simple antisocial behavior (which we will discuss next), online games can become so involving to people that their real lives are neglected or they can't separate the virtual world from the real. Take the case of South Korea's Kim Kyung-Jae, a 24-year-old who collapsed and died after playing online games nearly nonstop (taking breaks only to use the restroom and buy cigarettes) for 86 straight hours [Gluck02]. In another disturbing online gaming-related death, a 17-year-old British Columbia boy was killed after repeatedly trouncing three men in a game of *CounterStrike* at an Internet café. After one too many wins, the three men physically beat the 17-year-old, then left the café, returned with a handgun, and shot him [Devitt03]. Lastly, there is the case of a mentally troubled Wisconsin man who took his life with a shotgun after many months of a 12-hour-a-day *EverQuest* habit. His mother claimed to have found him with an *EverQuest* login screen up on his computer, and started a lawsuit against Sony, wanting warning labels placed on the games. Her belief is that some event online caused him to take his own life, and that Sony should be held partially responsible [Fox02]. While online gaming can't reasonably be held responsible for the behavior of a few emotionally troubled individuals, as more and more online games get more and more popular, statistically speaking, there will be an increase of these types of incidents.

Online Behavior: The Ugly

An interesting psychological phenomenon that has taken root in the online gaming world and in gaming forums is that of *deindividuation*. This is the phenomenon where anonymity allows the person to demonstrate behaviors that he would not be able to exhibit if he were known. A somewhat insidious noncomputer example of this is that of the Ku Klux Klan. Essentially, the white hoods and robes rob the individuals of their identity and thus their compunction to follow societal norms, allowing them to commit acts outside the bounds of accepted behavior. In online games, this behavior, taken to a far less extreme than in the KKK example, nonetheless allows people a certain anonymous "bravado" with which to fuel antisocial desires. In games, this often exhibits as rude or disruptive behavior to other players (excessive taunting, swearing, racial and homophobic epithets, etc.). In real life, these people almost universally would not be able to act this way, but in the anonymity of an online world, they have few perceptible limits on their behavior.

Tools

Society in the online world has come up with ways to deal with these issues. Just as the police in nonvirtual society enforce socially acceptable behavior, moderators and game wardens can help create a sense of stronger community within a game by encouraging social behavior and discouraging disruptive behavior. A game is not going to be fun to members of a particular ethnicity if that particular ethnicity is the target of the invective of some anonymous gamer. Gamers also like the ability to take control of their own destinies, as it were, so tools that allow them to ignore other users or report bad behavior are also a standard in most modern games with online capability.

Some of the more positive tools are those that facilitate communication. Often, games come with multiple tiers of communication. The MMPORPG *World of Warcraft* contains the ability to talk on a zone channel (where players can conduct general, game, or nongame chat to players within the same zone); a trade channel (to facilitate the buying and selling of player-created/found goods); a "say" channel with a limited range so players can communicate with those directly near them; a "yell" channel (a larger ranged "say" channel); a group channel (for communication within a joined party); a whisper channel (for private communication between players); and a guild channel (for discussion within player-created guilds). That's quite a few ways that people can do something seemingly simple, like talk with each other, but this reflects the myriad ways in which societal communication works (whispers, private phone calls, interaction with small groups, garage sales, yelling in a public place, social groups and clubs, etc.). In addition, the game features mailboxes where players can send each other messages, money, or goods (for when players are not on simultaneously), further enhancing the societal interaction and sense of cooperation.

In-game tools are only the start, though. There are many *EverQuest* fansites on the Internet, with seemingly more popping up every day. These sites contain elements like fan-created stories, game information, forums, newsletters, and fan-created art. Liken it to, for example, golfers, who purchase golfing magazines, wear golfing paraphernalia, spend time reading books about and discussing their favorite hobby. People like to spend time immersed in their favorite hobbies, even when they're not directly doing them. It's not hard to tie this into two of the fundamental reasons posited why people play video games, namely communication and interactivity.

Summary

The tremendous popularity of games can be attributed, in part, to characteristic elements of games that fulfill certain societal and personal needs. Some of these elements are real-time interaction, goals, and stages. Increasing audience and expanding demographics point to the further evolution of video games in their ability to incorporate these elements in a way that fulfills players' needs. Different game elements appeal differently to people. Culture and society have a major impact on the success of games because of this variability.

The success of video games as a fiscal and cultural entity is not without controversy, though, as people struggle to understand this emerging media's effect on society. In some cases, a game may find a niche within a particular culture or society; in others, a game element may inadvertently cause offense. In particular, concerns over the effects of violent games on youth are prevalent, with few comprehensive studies done that can point to clear answers. Lawmakers and judges will continue to hammer out issues of what regulations and restrictions should apply to games, while attempting to answer questions about whether games constitute speech or merely mechanical action.

Ultimately, the evolution and sophistication of games has led to a point where the communities that spring up within and around games act as a microcosm for the larger society. In-game tools and extra-game elements like fansites enable these in-game societies to function at a high level, and increase the absorption of video games into society. This absorption is also not without controversy, as some individuals are unable to successfully separate their online lives from their real lives.

Exercises

1. Take the statement: The ultimate measure of a video game's success is the absorption of its characters and symbols into other forms of media, such as television or movies. Defend or refute this statement.
2. Do you agree with the list of appealing video game elements (interactive play, goals, community facilitation, stages)? What would you change, remove, or add to this list?
3. What elements of a game need to be taken away before it can no longer be considered speech? At what point does it no longer become a game?
4. Discuss which is more violent, a game that uses very graphic, but cartoon-like violence, or a game that has mild, but incredibly realistic violence? Is realism the only key, or are there others?
5. Consider your culture and society. What aspects of your culture and society might be offensive to you if lampooned in a game? Would it depend on the overall presentation, or are there always taboo elements despite the presentation?

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