Ethics of Computer Game Design

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updated: June 14, 2010

Even in computer games, ethical issues are rarely black and white.

Computer games are becoming increasingly realistic due to advancements in graphics technology, raising questions about the ethical responsibilities of game designers. On one hand, designing video games that promote unethical behavior (violence, stealing, etc.) seems unethical---especially in a realistic setting. On the other hand, asking game designers to censor their work seems wrong, as video games are a form of creative expression.

"Bad" Content

1. Candidates for morally "bad" content include content that promotes violence, bigotry, promiscuity or even just foul language, because of the thought that the influence of this content causes players behave this way in the real world. Even if it does not influence behavior directly, it promotes and even glorifies patterns of thought and behavior considered undesirable by modern society.

Free Expression

2. The possibility of censorship in any form brings up issues of free expression. According to Dean Takahashi, "[l]egally, games qualify as a form of expression that is protected under the First Amendment." This does not mean that game designers are ethically free to design as they want. As with any issue of rights, conflicts will arise with the rights of others. In particular, if the content unduly influences players' thoughts or behavior, it conflicts with players' liberty and their right to form their own opinions and behaviors.

Buyer Beware

3. A popular argument against the censorship of video games holds that the onus is on the buyer to know what he is getting: If the content of a game a person purchases offends her, she should not have purchased it. If, however, the designers misrepresent the content, this would represent an ethical failing on their part.

Evidence

4. Evidence that computer games affect behavior remains inconclusive at best. Many studies claim that violent games lead to violent behavior. However, Patrick Kierkegaard suggests that most such studies contain bias in favor of this conclusion. He further argues that little statistical evidence exists showing that violent video games lead to increased violent behavior. On the other side, according to Dr. Craig Anderson, claims of murky evidence are incorrect because studies show clearly that violent video games lead to an increase in violent behavior.

Balance

5. As of 2010, no conclusive evidence exists showing that computer game content creates real-world negative behavior and thinking in players---but there is no conclusive evidence that it does not. Designers who want to provide controversial content in their computer games need to keep an eye on this issue. Designing computer games with content known to produce negative behavior in players constitutes unethical behavior. While free expression is important, using it to manipulate the public knowingly undermines it.

References

- Gamasutra: Ethics of Game Design
- "International Journal of Liability and Scientific Enquiry"; Video Games and Agression; Patrick Kierkegaard; May 2008
- American Psychological Association: Violent Video Games: Myths, Facts, and Unanswered Questions

http://www.ehow.com/about_6626529_ethics-computer-game-design.html