

Responsibility is a fearful thing. Accepting the benefits of the good potential in videogames requires an acknowledgement of the negative possibilities as well. In this way we begin to limit ourselves in speech, thought, and expression. But the idea of responsibility has gone mostly unacknowledged in videogames. Developers seem comfortable inventing fantasy settings or burrowing into history for their subjects, places where they're free from the murk of everyday morality.

But increasingly, games are addressing controversial subjects like Afghanistan, sex, violence against children, and the ignoble legacy of the CIA. In so doing they are challenging some of our safe, easy presumptions about responsible art and what the real effect of exposure to it might be. Is art dangerous? And should it, as a consequence, be responsible? Who gets to decide?

THE POWER OF TAKING OFFENSE

In a recent interview with *Edge*, Sion Lenton, Codemasters' creative director, said, "I personally don't want to focus on live conflict. I don't think it's appropriate and I don't think it's tasteful."

He was speaking about *Operation Flashpoint: Red River*, the newest shooter in a series known for slow pacing and an emphasis on realism. *Operation Flashpoint* games go beyond most modern shooters in their methodical pacing, long-distance tactical encounters, and player vulnerability, but they've always invented fictional conflicts for the action to take place in.

In 2009, Atomic Games and Konami transgressed this popular wisdom with *Six Days in Fallujah*, a game that was criticized by some who'd lost loved ones in the 2004 battle. *Fallujah* was summarily dropped by Konami. In 2010, EA and Danger Close found similar resistance with *Medal of Honor*, a shooter about a fictional operation set against the backdrop of the U.S.-led NATO attack on Afghanistan in 2002. After being pressured, EA chose to take the word "Taliban" out of the game's competitive multiplayer mode, though it

was left in single-player. While there's a decent fear of offending people who have suffered in real life as a result of losses in recent or ongoing military operations, there's an incoherence in each case. If games carry the power to be irresponsible, isn't it the gameplay that offends more than the contextual label attached to it?

"You need to understand going into the experience that the purpose of the experience is," Peter Tamte, president of Atomic Games, tells me. "*Six Days in Fallujah* was intended to make people feel a certain way—to make people feel like a Marine in modern combat."

While *Fallujah* has yet to be released, Atomic took many of the same technologies and concepts to *Breach*, a multiplayer shooter with a heavy focus on destructibility. "The technology we're using in *Breach* was started in *Six Days in Fallujah*," Tamte says.

"We were planning on using highly destructible environments to create an emotional response in *Fallujah*. So many of the stories we heard from the Marines involved destruction, so we had to build the technology. After we built the technology we realized there were all sorts of things you could [do] that change the player's orientation."

In this way, *Breach* is a strange instance of a game that safely uses controversial events from real life as a reference for entertainment. Sadly, *Breach*'s antecedent, which accurately labeled those points of inspiration in hopes of providing an experience that transcended simple competitive

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ART BOMB

CONFRONTING CONTROVERSIAL IDEAS IN VIDEOGAMES

by MICHAEL THOMSEN



Heavy Rain had an attempted rape, violence against children, and an interactive sex scene. Players make sense of it all on their own.

entertainment, is marked inappropriate and remains unreleased.

THE RIGHT TO TAKE A CHANCE

"It was a sense of responsibility that drew me to this project," Kurosh ValaNejad, a USC professor and co-developer of *The Cat and the Coup*, tells me. *The Cat and the Coup* is a game presented at IndieCade 2010 by VaiaNejad and Peter Brinson, who also developed the challenging *Waco Resurrection*.

Cat and the Coup is about the end of the life of Mohammed Mossadegh, the impassioned Iranian prime minister overthrown by a joint CIA-M6 operation in 1953 that reverted control of Iran's oil industry to BP (then the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company).

The game has players controlling Mossadegh's cat in the politician's dying years under house arrest after the coup. The cat is a means to direct Mossadegh's attention to different areas of the environment, which can trigger old memories about his beloved country.

"I had seen Peter working on it in the lab and simply wanted his game to look authentic—for the set-dressing to reflect 1950s Iran," VaiaNejad says. "As an Iranian-American—Iranian father, American mother—I knew his game could be dismissed by Iranians for minor inaccuracies." While the subject isn't as recent or

painfully complicated as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the essential issue of responsibly serving a historical event is no less relevant to *The Cat and the Coup*.

"As a people, we're still wrestling with the invasion of Iraq, and a game that seems to be making the death of real people fun is difficult to release as a mainstream game," Brinson says. "It's too bad, because good art can help us confront our feelings and beliefs on important topics, and games—as interactive systems—are texts that force the player to confront their subjects for themselves."

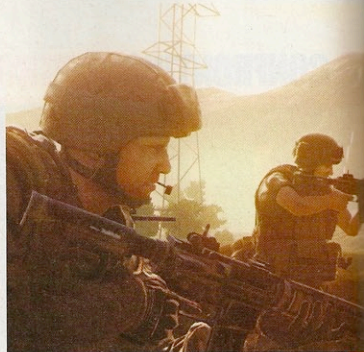
Jason Rohrer's still-unreleased *London Diamond Trade*, a two-player strategy game for the Nintendo DS, is based on the last days of colonial occupation in Angola and how it affected the already-corrupt diamond trade.

"BEFORE DEVELOPMENT, SOME PUBLISHERS DECLINED THE POSSIBILITY OF PRODUCING HEAVY RAIN BECAUSE THEY WERE SCARED OF POTENTIAL SCANDALS."

—QUANTIC DREAM'S PRESIDENT DAVID CAGE

"I think designers do feel an obligation to make their mechanics more realistic when they make games about real-world events," Rohrer said in a past conversation. "The game is not about the violence linked to the diamond trade, but about the mechanics of the diamond trade itself. In other words, there won't be any AK-47-wielding 10-year-olds running around."

Rohrer was careful not to sensationalize his subject with shock value and made sure to backup all of his interactive ideas with research. "I did struggle to keep the mechanics as true as possible to the reality of the diamond trade at that point in time," Rohrer continued. "For example, there is



The Cat and the Coup shows Mossadegh surrounded by pigs and rioters, all organized by the CIA.

a UN inspector mechanic, but I didn't just throw that in—my research confirmed that the UN was actively touring the region and collecting data during the time that my game takes place."

CONTROVERSY ON THE HOMESTEAD

Not all controversial subjects come from war or political intrigue. Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain* challenged popular wisdom by centering on mundane everyday actions and creating a network of scenarios of interactive sexuality and the threat of violence against children.

"Before development, some publishers declined the possibility of producing

Heavy Rain because they were scared of potential scandals," says David Cage, Quantic Dream's president and the creative force behind *Heavy Rain*. "Once development started, some people said they were unable to work on the game because they had lost a child themselves or someone close to them did. They felt too close to the subject to work on the title, which of course I can understand."

Heavy Rain's sex scene was provocative for a different reason. It gave players a chance to participate in an intimate act that seems antithetical to the common wisdom that games should be fun above anything else. Cage's sex scene was about vulnerable irrationality, not fun.

"The player has the choice of accepting or refusing the sexual act, which has significant consequences on the relationship with Madison," Cage says. "In the case the player agrees to have sex, he can play the preliminaries, the moment when the characters take their clothes off with passion."

"When they fall on the floor for the act itself, the player cannot interact anymore. I think this option keeps the player focused on characters and the story, avoids the funny side of playing intercourse while offering the player something to do."

WHO SETS THE STANDARD?

Underneath the debate over what's appropriate or inappropriate for videogames is the irresolvable question of whose cultural perceptions should be used to define appropriateness.

"It's pretty universal that people take norm enforcement very seriously, either explicitly punishing norm-violators or

excluding them," says David Rand, a research scientist at Harvard's Program for Evolutionary Dynamics. "But what specific norms are getting enforced vary dramatically across communities. ... Doing cross-cultural research and looking at how norms vary is a hot research topic right now. There are certainly some things that probably most cultures and communities would agree are not good, but it varies a lot."

There is also an interesting distinction between what we consider appropriate for art and what is appropriate for discussion in non-artistic contexts. The subject of Iraq, for instance, has been a non-stop presence in news and public debate over the last decade. The fact that's considered taboo for videogames says a lot about our presumptions about games themselves.

"If you are a news reporter and you are telling about some horrible or immoral thing that happened, it's not because you wanted to, it's because it happened," Rand says. "But if you are an artist, you are choosing what you create. So someone could think to themselves, 'Why did he have to be so offensive? He could have just made something more reasonable.'"

Often these sentiments extend beyond politics to thoughts on games themselves. "I find what upsets people the most are games that lack clear consequences, like *Tale of Tale's Graveyard*, where all you do is walk and then sit down," Brinson notes.

TRANSRESS LIKE YOU MEAN IT

Before anything else, videogames are an exchange of ideas and experiences between a developer and a player. This is the first and most important level of

creativity. We are all capable of choosing for ourselves what is offensive, inane, or wonderfully moving.

"Sincerity is for me the most important parameter, if you create something shocking but there is a meaning behind it—you did not intend to shock but shock was a consequence of what you had to say—that's fine with me," Cage says. "I have a problem when people are shocking and there is nothing else in the content—they just want to draw attention and create buzz. That is in bad taste and I lose interest."

The prevailing danger in all art is that the audience is left free to take what they want from it. Art is a transgression of the idea that there can be universal truths. Works that most challenge the consensus are the ones most easily labeled irresponsible or inappropriate. Games more than any other creative form enable individuals to shape their own experiences and define their own truths. That's both terrifying and exhilarating.

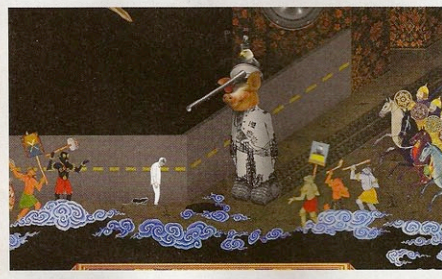
Responsibility is fearful because it requires reciprocity. You might be a responsible driver but it means nothing if the driver next to you decides to behave irresponsibly. It requires an act of faith in our fellow human beings. A prerequisite for this faith is freedom. Without it responsibility is not a sign of respect but a way of imprisoning one another by claiming victimization. Transgressing common wisdom in games is a reminder that none of us are entitled to place those chains on anyone but ourselves. Demanding respect and propriety in art is another way of postponing that moment of personal choice by demanding everyone else step into the chains first. ☐

When *Six Days in Fallujah* was dropped Atomic Games had to use their technology in another way. Thus *Breach* was born.

GAMES THAT GIVE SOMETHING BACK

While some worry about irresponsible videogames, many developers and publishers contribute charity to the causes related to their games. *Medal of Honor* developer Danger Close began a charity drive to raise money for the Navy SEAL Warrior Fund, an organization that supports the families of SEALs killed in action. Executive producer Greg Goodrich and marketing director Craig Owens grew beards during development and found sponsors to pay for each day of development they went without shaving, a sign of solidarity with many Tier One operators who grew beards to better blend in with Afghans.

Similarly, Activision set aside one million dollars to create an organization to help veterans find jobs after returning from service. The UN World Food Program went even further with *Free Rice*, a browser-based quiz game that pledged to donate 10 grains of rice for every one trivia question players answered



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