PIRATE'S WHALING

Disturbing and unethical historical events in video games

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Assessment 3 : Critical case study

Oliv Francey

S1828107

PIRATE'S WHALING

" *Caribbean Sea, early in the 18th century... You are Edward
Kenway, a sea pirate and member of the assassins' brotherhood.
You sail on board your pirate ship through the waves.
On the horizon, you see a white beast emerging from the beneath
the water, you scream to transcend your crew,
the whaling begins...* "

1. ONCE UPON A TIME...

This essay has been written as part of the Media and Culture course, taught by Pr. Richard Coyne at the University of Edinburgh.

The main theme is the use of disturbing or unethical events in video games.

To introduce the subject, I choose to present the whaling mechanics present in *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag* [ACBF]. The scene introduced above has been played by millions of players around the world in the fall of 2013 and after, on consoles and PCs.

To talk about this subject, I invited Maurizio Rigamonti, a friend who teaches and who works in the field of the video games. The discussion took place while he was talking in front of a television screen supposed to be an artificial intelligence [AI], which I managed in background (Francey, 2018).

The term *video game* will be used to express all gaming media used on consoles, PCs and smartphones. To distinguish the real experience from the virtual one, I will use the terms *real world* or *real life*. Finally, I will use the first person of the singular to talk about me or the AI from the filmed discussion.

2. LET'S HUNT SOME WHALES

As Maurizio Rigamonti says after having seen the whaling sequence, these mechanics were added to the game to illustrate a slice of the life of the seamen during this period. We should always think in which context these scenes are presented. In this case, they are there to increase the immersion of the player at that time.

Of course, the main controversy is to play these mechanics nowadays. The most virulent reaction to these hunts was from the organisation *People for Ethical Treatment of Animal* [PETA], which reacted even before the game was released. Relayed by many websites, their protest had leaked a lot of ink (Tach, 2013). One may question the fact that playing such mechanics could influence players. I will talk about this point in chapter 6 *Change in the Behaviour of the Players*.

3. WHERE ARE THE LIMITS?

There are many limits that are not supposed to be crossed, no one wants to watch or even worse to play a violent scene involving children, for example. Even the *Grand Theft Auto* game series, known to be one of the most controversial AAA (video games distributed and/or produced by mid-sized or major publishers), has banished children from its virtual world to be sure that nobody can harm or kill them in their games.

But sometimes these limits are unclear can also be modified according to the social environment and the targeted audience. For example, if a game presents a life experience in the 18th century, should racism be set aside to avoid hurting minorities and to prevent the spread of this behaviour to players?

Or, on the contrary, should these environments be kept in game to inform and educate players, hoping that they do not make the same mistakes as their ancestors in their real life?

Karim Murji address these issues in his article *Using racial stereotypes in anti-racist campaigns* (Murji, 2006). Although, he writes specifically about racism, he demonstrates that it is not so easy to use shocking images to inform people and he concludes by saying that "it requires a more developed and refined tactics" (p. 279) to achieve this goal.

4. WHY ARE THESE SCENES IN VIDEO GAMES?

Despite the fact that the developers could try to be as accurate as possible in relation to the reality or historical facts of certain games, it is amazing that often video game designers and publishers tend to try to get an 18-year-old label for their games. As Maurizio evokes in the discussion, the audience and even more the young people are attracted by this label, which promises adult experiences ranging from alcohol or drugs use to insults and sex scene or anything at a time.

By comparing, in other media like movies, production companies tend to aim to the lowest limit to get a wider audience. One of many examples we can cite is the film *The King's Speech* (2010), which was rated R ["Contains some adult material. Parents are urged to learn more about the film before taking their young children with them." (MPAA, 2018)] because the term fuck has been used five times in a short frustration scene. The *Motion Picture Association of America* [MPAA] told the producers that they would rate the movie PG-13 ["Parents are urged to be cautious. Some material may be inappropriate for pre-teenagers." (MPAA, 2018)] if they cut this scene. In the first place, they decided to keep the movie untouched, but after the movie became an Oscar winner, they yielded to the pressure of the MPAA and a PG-13 version was released on screens across the United States ("The King's Speech," 2018; McGranaghan, 2017). The video game industry organize beta phases to test their production with the players, but they are more there to test the mechanics and servers than for the content itself, unlike the audience tests for movies.

Finally, the presence of these scenes can cause really bad publicity, as I mentioned earlier in the PETA case against ACBF. Nowadays, with the ubiquity of social media, it is almost impossible to anticipate the size of the protests provoked by a controversial game or a controversial sequence of a game on the Internet.

The protests could be considered bad publicity for the game, but in the end, people and the press talk or write about it, and generates free publicity for the game and, as Oscar Wilde wrote: "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about" (Wilde, 1890). If we add to this that many players are looking for this type of game, it is even more difficult to see these virulent reactions as a bad thing for producers.

5. WHY IS THERE SOME DIFFERENCES IN THE AGE CLASSIFICATION DEPENDING ON THE REGIONS

There are different rating systems around the world. The five more important are: in Europe, *Pan European Game Information* [PEGI], in USA, *Entertainment Software Rating Board* [ESRB], in Germany, *Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle* [USK], in Japan, *Computer Entertainment Rating Organisation* [CERO] and the *Australian Classification Board*.

The simple fact that there are different classification systems shows that the cultural context influences how different types of image can be perceived from different points of view in different parts of the world.

In Europe, it is difficult to approach the subject of the sex. On the contrary, the subject is very common in Japan, even if they censor many scenes.

In addition, some countries, such as Australia, are much stricter than others. This can be political or historical, like Germany, which I talk about in the chapter 8 *The Swastika is Back in Video Games in Germany*.

To illustrate these differences, we can take a look at the ratings of the game *The Sims 4* around the world.

> In the US, The Sims 4 was rated Teen (13+). The respective content characteristics are below: "Content is generally suitable for ages 13 and up. May contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, simulated gambling and/or infrequent use of strong language." Out of all the above, The Sims 4 features only "explicit sexual content of moderate impact."

> In Australia, the game was rated M (Mature) ("the game might contain violence and nudity of moderate impact"). That means The Sims 4 is recommended to children over 15 but is not prohibited for purchase by children under 15. The right to decide whether the content is appropriate for a child belongs to parents.

> In Europe, PEGI rated The Sims 4 as 12+. This category tolerates non-graphic violence and nudity, and bad language in this category must be mild and fall short of sexual expletives

Germany decided to bypass PEGI and rated the game as 6+. In Germany, age-based ratings mostly consider violence. In fact, there is no explicit and graphic violence in The Sims 4, besides an opportunity to kill-off the character. At the same time, the death won't be depicted realistically and the game does not display blood. (Robot, 2016)

6. COULD VIDEO GAMES CAUSE CHANGES IN THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE PLAYERS?

This is certainly the most sensitive and controversial point of the video game. The video games, at least the good ones, are developed to create an experience for the player and to immerse him in a virtual world. Thus, from a certain point of view, if a game is well thought out, the player should experiment the desire to change or adapt his behaviour in the game.

Other media, as movies or books, tend to reach their viewers or readers in the same way, but with different tools and mechanics. In most of the animated media, everything is given to them: images, sound, atmosphere, even the behaviour of the characters. Spectators can identify with a character or relate to their own experiences, that's good enough, but they are stuck in these limits. For its part, a written story will let the mind of the readers create many images that they will elaborate upon receiving descriptions. They can create their own visual version of the environment and even of the characters, depending on the accuracy of the descriptions of the author. A video game provides players a lot of information, but the most immersive gives them the opportunity to embody the character and give them choices to influence the story or evolution of their character. It is their responsibility to choose or perform certain actions.

Let's not forget that, whatever the medium, I can decide at any time to stop watching, reading or playing if what is presented to me or expected of me displeases or annoys me.

To return to the main subject, video games are made to change the behaviour of the players. But, from my point of view, there is a more important question that concerns all types of media: Will the player transfer these changes to his real life?

Don Gotterbarn discusses this point in his article *The ethics of video games: Mayhem, death, and the training of the next generation,* he says about very immersive video games that "this is so powerful that many players are engaged to such a degree that they are motivated to learn, and even search for solutions outside the game" (Gotterbarn, 2009).

On the one hand, he demonstrates that the behaviour of a player in a game can be transferred to real life with the example of a soldier who felt like in a game while shooting at the enemy in Iraq (p. 370).

On the other hand, he talks about Tavinor and quotes him. "If what was fictionally occurring in the world of Grand Theft Auto was genuinely occurring, the player would not be enjoying it quite so much!" (p. 371).

In conclusion about this point, I think that video game is the most immersive medium, but as I mention in the next chapter, it is not necessarily related to harmful behaviour and events.

7. THE FRONT LINE

As Maurizio Rigamonti said in the course of the conversation, one of the reasons video games still occupy a prominent place in the press, especially when a tragic event occurred is that it is as a new media, or at least one of the youngest among the main ones. It is still only a matter of time before new media are fully understood by the masses. In the past, new media has often led to criticism and fear. Comics were violent, television will create a generation of idiots, and so on. It is always easier to designate a less well-known medium to explain strange or dramatic behaviours.

Additionally, media magnify this vision of the video game. Indeed, it is easier and more efficient for them to show a video game sequence of war in the evening news than the cover of a book. Although the tragedy occurs in the world of video games, information is often biased. As an example, regarding summer 2018 shooting in Jacksonville that occurs during an American football video game tournament, most media have titled their article on video games and gamers without mentioning the type of game in question, as the BBC with its article "Florida shooting: Video gamers killed by rival at tournament" (BBC, 2018a).

With regard to the two previous points, Victor C. Strasburger and Ed Donnerstein show in their article *The New Media of Violent Video Games: Yet Same Old Media Problems?* (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 2013) that this question is not new and media, considered today as old, have already met the same criticisms in the past. They also mention that no study currently links violence in video games to aggressive behaviour. Furthermore, as noted by Colin Campbell in his web article *A brief history of blaming video games for mass murder*: "A 2004 report from the Secret Service and the Department of Education researched 37 incidents of school violence and found that 24 percent of the attackers expressed an interest in violent books, while 12 percent were interested in games. 37 percent were interested in violence expressed in their own writings 'such as poems, essays, or journal entries.'" (Campbell, 2018).

Finally, we can talk about the video game industry, which is often shooting itself in the foot by almost always highlighting violent and impactful scenes and mechanics in their advertisements. As I already mentioned, players look for them in games, but it always gives a bad image of video games. I am not saying that we should hide these facts from the public, but they should also show that there are other types of non-violent, educational and other games.

8. THE SWASTIKA IS BACK IN VIDEO GAMES IN GERMANY

To conclude the discussion, we talked with Maurizio about a recent event in the video game, the lifting of the ban of the swastika and other images related to Nazism in the video games in Germany. Indeed, in August 2018, the German government decided to allow these references in video games (BBC, 2018b). Other media could already use them if they have a historical link.

As was apparent during the discussion, and as we all know, tragic events occurred under Nazi rule in Germany and throughout Europe. They are hard to forget, and people want to distance themselves from them.

As I explain in Chapter 6 *Could Video Games Cause Changes in the Behaviour of the Players?*, video games usually require the player to play the character, literally embody it. And with

the limited choices and mechanics that a video game can offer to the player, he may have to perform actions that he really does not want, which is even more problematic in regard of such a sensitive topic.

In relation with these points, we can understand why the video game was the last medium on which these symbols can be used. It also shows that this young medium may not be ready to deal with sensitive and complex topics.

9. CONCLUSIONS

It was a challenge to deal with as many points in a 10-minute conversation and in this essay. There is a lot to say about the controversial subject of violence and unethical facts in video games.

To return to our starting point, the scene of whaling in *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*, this kind of scene has its place in video games if its goal is to increase the experience by adding historical facts or bringing an education. Of course, some limits must be set.

As in all media, these scenes can be controversial because we all react differently to actions or events that affect us individually. PETA was outraged by the presence of the whaling, but they do not even talk about other facts or events of the game that could also disturb. The response from the developer Ubisoft illustrates that:

> History is our playground in Assassin's Creed. Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag is a work of fiction that depicts the real events during the Golden Era of Pirates. We do not condone illegal whaling, just as we don't condone a pirate lifestyle of poor hygiene, plundering, hijacking ships, and over-the-legal-limit drunken debauchery. (Cai, 2013)

Furthermore, nowadays it is impossible to directly link video games to violent and harmful behaviour, but I agree to that as an immersive media, but I agree that this immersive media could encourage people to change their real-life behaviour. As a young media, video games are not well known to the masses. People should be more informed by professional and not just the media, which, as I mentioned earlier, often demonise video games.

Age rating systems in place should have more power and be helped by laws that prevent young people from playing certain types of games. This can be directly linked to my previous point in educating parents, who are ultimately the first shield for their children. I hope this will improve with the years as the parents of tomorrow will have grown up with video games.

With increased knowledge of the general public about these mechanics, better information for parents, a game industry that is not just looking for certain labels and an effective and legally supported age limitation system, the world of video games, young and growing, would be better and could evolve serenely in the years to come.

Wordcount: 2963.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

INTERVIEWED PERSON

I asked Maurizio Rigamonti to talk about this case. He is the president of the Swiss Game Center, lecturer in Game Dev at University of Fribourg, coordinator and Professor at EPAC (École Professionnelle des Arts Contemporains, Saxon, Switzerland) and CEO at sugarcube IT. I ask him because of the knowledge he acquired in video games by working and teaching in this field for many years now.

VIDEO TYPE

The video is a Question Box type interview. I was inspired by the "Boîte à questions" interviews from Canal+, a French television channel (Canal+, 2018).

Maurizio was seated in front of a television and talked to it as it was an AI, which I controlled from my computer.
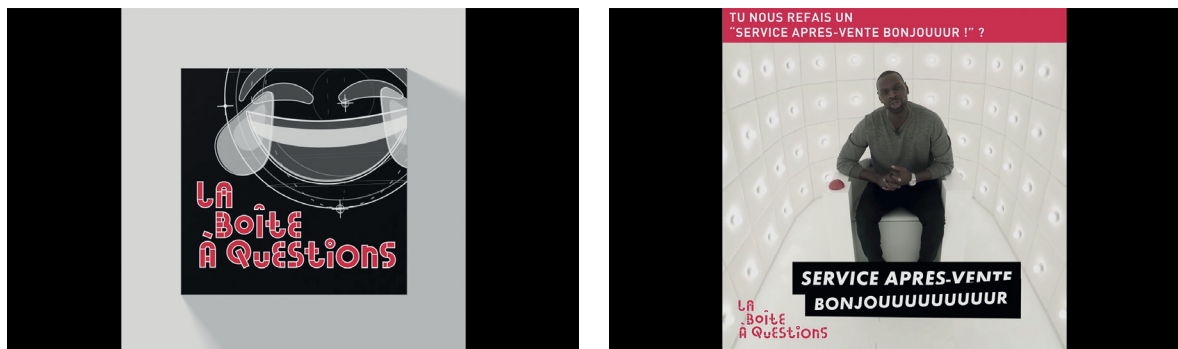

Figure 1: La boîte à Questions – Omar Sy — YouTube — Canal +
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Coi-PyzGmA]

CONVERSATION BETA TEST

I conducted two beta tests of my conversation. These simulations showed me that my questions were not precise enough for the kind of interview I intend to do. I rewrote them more accurately and I added a "if yes / if no" choice to allow me to conduct the conversation in a much better way.

CONVERSATION LOCATION

The conversation took place in the school where I work, eikon.

THE SET UP

One week before the shooting, I set up the set to do some tests. As I have not filmed anything for 15 years, which allowed me to familiarise myself with current technologies such as LED panels and recent cameras. With the help of Sebastien, one of my students, we tested the setup and the lights.

These different tests allowed me to be quicker and more efficient the day of the shooting. I've made a time-lapse video of the setting of the setup (this video was posted with assessment 2 and is viewable at the following URL: http://bit.ly/oliv_pirateswhalingsetup, password : acbf).

FONTS

I use two different fonts for this project: Lato and Trajan Pro. The choice has been made to add some contrast between the plain text, which uses the Lato, and the headings that are written with the Trajan Pro. This is the font used in the Assassin's Creed logo.

Lato

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
1234567890

Trajan Pro

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
1234567890

COLOURS

I choose a two-colour palette for this project. They will be used for the print files and on the video. The black will be used mostly for the text and the dark red as a contrast colour. The latter is actually the red used in the Assassin's Creed: Black Flag logo.

Black : #000000

Dark Red : #9f1a1b

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