

## Immersive [Im]Morality

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Immersion can be described as “captivating external stimuli without real-world consequences.” Using this definition of immersion, it would stand to reason that video games, a type of “immersive” entertainment, should thus be void of **any** real-world consequences. And while many would argue against what is “real” and what is not, for the sake of clarity, we can define “real” as that which occurs in the day-to-day experiences of our physical bodies. Real-world experiences will thus have real, physical consequences. If a man jumps from a building in the physical world, he will not emerge unscathed; conversely, doing the same in a game world might also result in his game character’s death or injury, but it is not permanent. He can still play again. Therefore, the potential danger of immersive media is the creation of real world scenarios in an environment that apparently has no real-world consequences. It may seem like harmless fun, but what are the long-term effects of these moral decisions when they occur in an immersive environment? And what can be done to reverse the popular trend of patently immoral (or possibly amoral) immersive media? Or, does “morality” as we know it even exist in immersive media?

Before any discussion of morality, a few more terms must first be defined. Firstly, ethics is defined in part by *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary* as “a set of moral principles or values.” Morality is defined then as “conformity to ideals of right human conduct” (Merriam-Webster). These definitions seem fairly clear, but while the concept of morality might seem clear, the definitions of what is “right” and what is “wrong” are typically not as easily defined. Certainly,

there are laws in place that dictate what is legal and illegal in a given culture, but “right” and “wrong” are not often black and white decisions in today’s society. Along with greater amounts of freedom of choice come more difficult decisions and greater moral confusion. Americans can oppose the death penalty but at the same time have no concerns about aborting an unborn child. Others can petition for their right to bear firearms at home while opposing war efforts abroad that could possibly help preserve the very freedoms that they enjoy. But without at least some sort of defined system of order, American culture would collapse.

The United States of America has created a system of order that guides the population in what is considered to be moral and ethical decisions. This system was created (usually by popular opinion), given meaning, and is now the governing force. Laws were created, and Americans are now ruled by them and suffer the consequences when they break them. And, as other cultures throughout history, many citizens are now challenging this system of order. With advances in technology, many questions that lie outside of the realm of today’s given moral guidelines have begun to arise. For example, should humans be cloned for “parts?” Many in the medical community feel that this is an invaluable research opportunity, while others feel that it is immoral to artificially engineer a human to dissect it for spare parts, no matter how many lives might be saved by these harvested organs. Not surprisingly, there are not many laws or guidelines in place to handle such a dilemma. In some ways it is becoming necessary to break the system and start over, but it is now unclear on what to base the new code of ethics. In the past, the forefathers of the country based “right” and “wrong” on principles found in the Bible. Church and state were separate, but church clearly affected the state. And while that might have been just fine for the public at the time, many now unfortunately feel that biblical principles have no place

in today's society. Through the use of technology, today's popular media can be seen reflecting the same restructuring. Video games are a prime example, for in no other current medium is it easier to create a world with its own set of ethics and rules. Popular culture is struggling to revamp commonly held views of "right" and "wrong."

Creativity is a critical part of what makes humans **human**, and through technology, there is a nearly limitless ability to create whatever the heart desires. Computer technology has allowed the creation of new ways to experience life and living. In a movie or video game, the audience or game player can be transported to a world entirely unlike the physical world and engage in experiences that he or she could otherwise never know. It will only be a matter of time before video games are so convincingly realistic that it will be common for someone to completely "lose themselves" in a game environment.

Advances in technology bring change and these advances have changed what it means to be human. What would life be like without modern technology? What would America be today without the PC, televisions, or video games? Humans change technology and it changes them in return – It is an endless cycle. And as technology now allows for immersion into very richly detailed game worlds, what happens when people are so involved in these worlds that they allow them to shape their perceptions of what is "right" and "wrong" in the real world? If immersion can be described as "captivating external stimuli without real-world consequences," then by this definition, it negates the idea that playing video games could shape someone's view of morality in real life. However, by immersing themselves in games worlds, players can become ignorant of the cause and effect of their actions. If games enforce a separation between mind and body, and

these games begin to shape their perceptions of “right” and “wrong”, then what happens when they are unable to see the “right / wrong”-ness of their actions outside of those game worlds? Media professionals can no longer ignore the values instilled in their products, especially more interactive (and arguably more immersive) media such as video games. And parents especially will need to monitor what video games are available to their children in a once youth-dominated market.

“Then, shall we simply allow our children to listen to any stories that anyone happens to make up, and so receive into their minds ideas often the very opposite of those we shall think they ought to have when they grow up?’ Socrates in Plato's *The Republic* (translation by D. Lee, 2nd ed., Penguin, London 1987)” (Gillespie).

When creating a game, it is possible for developers to create nearly any experience imaginable. Currently, the only limitation is the constraints of the hardware available on which to play a game, and this limitation is quickly becoming increasingly less restrictive. It is possible to create beauty and order not seen in the real-world, just as it is also possible to create disorder and chaos. Johan Huizinga claims that through play “a society expresses its interpretation of life and the world” (Huizinga, 46). If this is true and if video games are a primary source of “play,” then what is it that today’s video games are saying about American’s game players?

Systems of rules and ethics are inherently created when a game world takes shape. Without these systems in place, a game world would not feel complete. However, what developers ask themselves is what **kind** of rules and ethics are they creating for this new world? Violence has long been a prevalent part of many video games and continues to be a popular additive to game worlds. Now, as the market for electronic gaming is becoming increasingly dominated by adults, games containing even more adult-oriented content are starting to emerge.

Popular media has defined what is now considered appropriate entertainment material, generally in the forms of nudity, sex, violence, crude sexual humor. People have already become accustomed to graphic violence in games – Crude sexual humor and nudity are obviously the next logical steps in the progression.

Games such as *BMX XXX* have now been released into the mainstream game market. This game features crude sexual humor as well as nudity (some of which is provided by video footage of real-world strippers). Controversy developed around the game prior to its release, but it remains to be seen how popular the game will be. Nonetheless, it is a bit disappointing that a game developer thought that this type of content is what the consumer is demanding. Not surprisingly, the developers of the game complained about undue criticism concerning the game's content. In a press release from October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2002, Greg Fischbach, Co-Chairman and CEO of Acclaim, stated:

“We believe that there is a general, unfair characterization of the interactive entertainment industry and as a result, our product is being held to an entirely different standard than other entertainment media with comparable content, including movies, television and radio. According to NPD's August report, more than 60 percent of all next-generation hardware owners are men over the age of 18, and this combined with the fact that last year's number one selling game was mature rated, fully supports our belief in the demand for this type of content.”

Apparently Acclaim is simply trying to break away from a video game market that has been traditionally seen as a market for children only; they are only trying to meet the “demand” that apparently already exists. Statistics have been reported that claim 1/3 of video game software purchases in the first 10 months of 2002 were for gamers over the age of eighteen (Moran). Fischbach continued to say,

“While we acknowledge that we are setting new benchmarks with *BMX XXX*, we are disappointed that there are groups who fail to see how this humorous product is truly on par with such widely accepted mainstream entertainment experiences, including movies like *American Pie*, and TV shows like *The Sopranos* and *Sex and the City*. As a leading publisher, we fully believe that consumers should have a right to choose their entertainment, and with that right comes the importance of responsible consumerism.”

“Responsible consumerism”? It sounds as if game companies are no longer concerned with the morality of the content in their games; they create a game, put it into the market, and if people buy it, great! It is discouraging that this is the best entertainment content that developers are able to produce. Has technology desensitized people to things that would once have been shunned by the public?

To expound any further on game morality, it is first necessary to look at a few examples of game world morality in greater depth. These will include: *Unreal Tournament 2003*, *Max Payne*, *Black & White*, *Deus Ex*, and of course, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. Each of these games offers a different slant on systems of morality (or lack thereof) within a game world.

First in our lineup is *Unreal Tournament 2003*. Much like its predecessor, *Unreal Tournament*, *Unreal Tournament 2003* pits players against each other in various surroundings and engages them in an intense battle. Various powerful firearms are at the player’s disposal, most of which could not exist in today’s physical world. The goal of the game is simple: “kill or be killed.” While the game world itself is gorgeously detailed, the story of the game is virtually non-existent. It vaguely describes the “history” behind the tournament and gives each character in the game his/her background story. But this is **not** the type of game in which people expect a deep plot or immersive story. It is pure, unadulterated action and violence.

The game can be played against (or in cooperation with) computer-controlled players (called “bots”), or human players via the Internet, which is where the game has really developed its popularity. This type of game world morality could be considered “killing for sport.” With this type of ethics system in place, killing is expected, encouraged, and rewarded. The **goal** of the game is to kill better, faster, and with more efficiency than your opponents. While the game is relatively graphic in its depiction of violence, it is by no means trying to mimic a real world of violence. Players die, and then instantly “respawn” and join right back into the fight. Death is not permanent and has no consequences. *Unreal Tournament 2003* makes violence fun, but it is not violence that would be possible in the real, physical world.

A second model of game morality could be defined as “vigilante justice,” experienced in the game *Max Payne*. In this game, the player controls an NYPD police officer named, not surprisingly, Max Payne. The game world of *Max Payne* mimics the look, feel, and physics of real-world circumstances. Weapons and bullet effects are excruciatingly detailed, with empty shell casings falling from guns, debris flying from everything struck by bullets, and blood splattering from fallen enemies onto walls, ceilings, and floors. The environments look and sound convincingly gritty, and it all seems quite “real” . . . with one important difference. Players are given the supernatural ability to temporarily slow down time. When this ability is engaged, everything slows down **except** for the player’s ability to aim and fire Max’s weapons. This allows the player to perform otherwise impossible feats of marksmanship.

Unlike *Unreal Tournament 2003*, *Max Payne* has a very detailed storyline. The game begins as Max arrives home one evening to hear the screams of his wife and newborn child being

brutally murdered. After gunning down the murderers (moments too late), the player is sent on a non-stop killing spree to track down the answer to the mystery behind the murders. Max is soon framed for the murders and the only man who could have cleared his name is murdered shortly thereafter. Now, Max is on the run, and the player must try to help him clear his name and avenge the murder of his wife and child while evading the police. Ultimately, the player figures out who is behind the murders and kills her (yes, a woman is the mastermind) at the end of the game. The violence is clearly a means to an end, wrapped around an ultimate purpose.

Along with all of its violence, the game also contains many references to drugs; In fact, the whole reason that Max's wife and child were murdered was because the men sent to murder her were charged up on some sort of super-drug called valkyr. In one level of the game, after being injected with a nearly fatal dose of the drug, Max is transported into a drug-induced hallucinogenic state. This game level is creatively done while at the same time very emotionally disturbing. Nonetheless, at the end of the game, *Max Payne* attempts to set itself apart from most other violent games by instilling repercussions for the main character's actions – The police finally catch up with Max and he is arrested. *Max Payne* ends with a small reminder that in the “real” world, no matter what his purpose, a man cannot go on a shooting spree without some sort of dire consequences. *Max Payne*, in all of its violent ways, actually teaches some small lesson in morality. A lesson that is possibly lost in all of the “fun” of the violence, but a lesson nonetheless.



The next example of game world morality is *Black & White*. By its very title, one could easily guess that the game deals with the ethical issue of evil vs. good and from the game's onset, there is no doubting its theme. The game begins in part with the following voice over:

“A land of innocence has no need for gods. . . until fate intervenes. When people pray, a god is always born. Able to change eternity. . . that god is YOU. Are you a blessing or a curse? Good or evil? Be what you will. . . you are destiny!” (Lionhead)

In *Black & White*, the player is empowered as a deity. Since the player has no avatar within the game world that represents him or herself (apart from a floating hand), the player is given control of a creature that they select from real-world animals (cow, tiger, or ape). As the player progresses through the game, he or she must make decisions how “good” or “evil” of a god they want to be. They express this goodness (or evilness) by how they train their creature and how they treat the local villagers through the miracles they use and through the actions of their creature. For example, if the player chooses to be evil, he can encourage his creature to eat villagers, thus causing them to fear him as a god. Or, the player can punish the creature for eating villagers and instead train him to help them; he ultimately decides what the creature will deem as “good” and “bad.”

More worship equals more power, so no matter which path is chosen (good or evil), the goal is to be worshipped by the people and to become the most powerful of the gods. If the good side is chosen, villagers will worship the player because he has blessed them and made them happy. Whereas if the player has chosen to be evil, they can punish the villagers using the creature that they have created and by doing such things as casting fire on them from the sky. As your creature and the game world become increasingly more good or evil, they reflect these

changes visually. Evil creatures will grow horns and become deformed as they grow, and the landscape will become charred and hell-like. If things are becoming more “good,” the creature will become more childlike and happy-looking as it grows, and the landscape will become lush and vibrant. *Black & White* truly lets the player decide how the ethical system of the game will develop over time, with but one odd twist.

Strangely, the developers thought it necessary to instill a “conscience” mechanism into the game. It is interesting that a “god” should need a “conscience”. Shouldn’t the god be the source of morality? The deciding factor of what is good and what is evil? Those concepts apparently were not thought to be important to the game. The player’s “conscience” is represented by the stereotypical demon and angel creatures. These characters occasionally pop up on the screen to give the player advice on how to deal with various situations in the game. Obviously, the two almost always have differing opinions. Whichever side of their conscience to which the player most often listens will appear most often. It is possible though for the player to ignore them both and do whatever he or she desires, but that would ultimately lead to failure.

It seems a unique concept to allow the player to become a god and control the moral structure of a world. Or is it? Is mankind not responsible right now for controlling the moral structure of **this** world? The laws and guidelines that we live by today have been created by mortal men. If there is “evil” in the world, it exists because men have allowed it, and at times, even propagated it. The world will only become as “black” or “white” as mankind allow it. Ironically, *Black & White* ultimately punishes a person for being **too** evil; if the villagers are

totally neglected, they will starve and die. It seems that even “evil” deities must take care of their followers! Perhaps even gods have to consider the consequences of their actions.

A fourth example of game world morality is that which is presented in *Deus Ex*. The game world of *Deus Ex* forces players to realize that not every choice is “black and white.” The player is placed into the role of a nano-technology augmented government agent named J.C. Denton. Throughout the development of the game’s plot, the player makes morality-based decisions that branch the story in different directions.

Friendliness will result in the NPC’s (Non-Player Characters) willingness to share items and information. Cruelty leads to the opposite, and can also sometimes result in hostility from other game characters. Game characters will also react to how the player has treated them in the past and will also respond differently depending on their individual personality and the location. For example, if the player pulls out a gun in a bar, some NPC’s will run around screaming and ducking for cover, while others might open fire on the player to defend themselves. Guns and violence are certainly **not** always the best methods of approaching characters in *Deus Ex*. Surprisingly, the player is also allowed to choose non-violent solutions to many (although not all) of the game’s situations. *Deus Ex 2: Invisible War* looks to promise even more flexibility with moral decisions and may allow the player to navigate through the entire game without firing a shot. The game claims to include, “Non-lethal, non-violent resolution to conflict, allowing players to make **ethical statements** through their actions.” (*Deus Ex 2*, emphasis added). It is interesting that a player would be making “ethical statements” in a non-real world. Apparently the game developers do not see the world of *Deus Ex* as one that is devoid of real-world morality.

In the world of *Deus Ex*, some game decisions are easier made than others, but at the end of the story, none of the three possible endings are an easy choice. At the finale, the player is allowed to choose how it will all end. Should J.C. aid a seemingly psychotic scientist in taking over the world (by joining the Illuminati)? Should he destroy the potentially dangerous A.I. system that is taking over the world, but as a result set the world into a new Dark Age, void of a communication infrastructure? Or should he instead attempt to merge with this A.I. and become almost god-like, with the risk of losing himself to the very computer system he's attempting to control? None of the choices are necessarily the absolute best, but a choice MUST be made in order to finish the game. It is this forcing of ethical decisions, along with the opportunity to react to situations in logical, moral (or immoral) ways, which makes the world of *Deus Ex* so interesting. When its sequel is released, it sounds as if it will parallel today's real-world restructuring of ethics systems in even more astonishing ways. The overview of *Deus Ex 2: Invisible War* is stated as follows:

“Approximately 20 years after the events depicted in *Deus Ex*, the world is only beginning to recover from a catastrophic worldwide depression. In the chaotic period of recovery, several religious and political factions see an opportunity to re-shape a worldwide government to their agendas, understanding that the right moves now could determine the shape of human society for decades – even centuries – to come. In this techno-nightmare, take part in the dark struggle to raise the world from its own ashes.”

It remains to be seen whether or not *Deus Ex 2: Invisible War* will live up to its promises. If it does, it is possible that this game could very well change the way that people in the future look at systems of game world morality. If a game is going to mimic real-world places and situations, why not give the player the options to react in ways that he or she would actually react in real life? It could give the player the option to settle conflicts in non-violent ways, and allow them to bring their own morality into the game world. It could also, give the players the option to

go **against** what is socially acceptable behavior, but let there be consequences for these actions. The world of *Deus Ex* is a world where your actions **do** have consequences.

Quite possibly on the opposite end of the moral spectrum from *Deus Ex* is *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. *GTA: Vice*, as it is popularly abbreviated, allows players to immerse themselves in a world that encourages (and allows) deviant behavior. The game is filled with all sorts of less-than-socially-acceptable activities including (obviously) car-jacking, drug use, prostitution, random acts of violence, gang violence, and foul language. It should come as no surprise that the game includes these themes. . . Many popular films and television programs deal with the very same things. However, where *GTA: Vice* differs is that it takes this same subject matter and puts the **player in control**. The game allows players to find out what it might be like to steal a car, run down some pedestrians, pick up a prostitute, and participate in a drive-by shooting – All within the span of a couple hours.

Although the game attempts to create an environment that is at least somewhat “realistic,” the consequences for the player’s actions are inadequate at best. Getting killed, or “wasted” as it is called in the game, results only in your player re-appearing fully-healed in front of the hospital. Getting arrested, or “busted,” results in the same, except the player is placed in front of the police station. Granted, it IS “only a game,” but these punishments still seem quite inconsequential. I suppose the game’s developer figured the player would be getting “wasted” and “busted” quite often and did not want the penalty to become annoying. But is it safe “play” for normal, healthy adults to participate in such immoral acts without concern of the

consequences? The developers at Rockstar Games must have anticipated this moral quandary.

Greg Kasavin, Executive Editor of GameSpot.Com, explains:

“ . . . [W]hen we talk about games that are highly immersive – a quality that many gamers desire in their games – we’re often referring to the fact that they have an avatar-style main character. On the other hand, games that have avatar-style main characters and depict reprehensible subject matter are the ones that usually take a lot of flak from the mainstream press. First-person shooters like *Counter-Strike* are often reviled because they teach *you* how to shoot and kill people. *Grand Theft Auto III* got a bad rap in some circles because some thought it was a game about **you** killing cops and prostitutes. It’s interesting that the imminent *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* will feature a main character who is a clearly defined persona with his own name, voice, personality, and agenda, instead of the sort of avatar-style main character featured in *GTA III*. You control the main character in *GTA: Vice City*, but you don’t make up his mind. Now it’s Tommy Vercetti doing the dirty work – your hands are clean” (CNET).

So, by separating the players from the actions of their avatar, Rockstar Games has essentially freed players from the moral ramifications of their in-game actions. This is an interesting approach to game world ethics. If it is not the actual player making the decisions (as in the previous three *Grand Theft Auto* games), then are the actions taken in the game nothing more than good, clean fun? Have morals become so relaxed that being serviced by prostitutes (for health points, of course) and then killing them to get money back is acceptable “play”? This can actually be done in this insanely popular game. While not necessarily an intended method for “free” health points, players of the game figured out that it could be done and have exploited it. This might say more about the morals of the game player themselves rather than those of the developers. In a game world nearly void of morals, perhaps it is the players themselves that create morality. This **could** be true of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, except the player is not given the possibility of **not** being a deviant. Maybe the game’s largest moral flaw is that it **only** allows players to act as criminals.

So what does all of this in-game immorality really mean, or does it even matter? Do the concepts of “good vs. evil” really even **exist** in video games? These are questions that are not likely to be definitively answered any time soon, but some developers seem to believe that the moral thermometer rests in the amount of the player’s immersion in the game world. Rockstar Games has controlled the level of immersion in *GTA: Vice* by giving the player control of Tommy Vercetti, a drug runner with a chip on his shoulder concerning a lost shipment of cocaine. While the player is immersed in the game world itself, he or she at the same time is detached from the main character. The players perform acts of violence, pimping, drug-running, etc. because that is what they expect Tommy would do. They empathize with the character, but he is a defined character with clear goals of his own that the players are only helping him accomplish. This type of immersion makes it easier for the players to ignore the moral ramifications of their actions in the game world. After all, Tommy is the one doing the killing, he is just being “helped” along by the player.

Therefore, a more potentially dangerous form of immersion is that in which the player is either not represented by an on-screen persona, or a generic one which the player “becomes.” The character is very loosely-defined at best, and the players are allowed to “fill in the blanks” of their character. This type of immersion could be more potentially damaging to a player’s morality in the real world since the player is not separated from the morality of his actions in the game world. For all practical purposes, the player himself is performing the actions displayed in the game. If there are not harsh consequences for immoral actions in a game, then the player assumes that these actions are acceptable play (or even **encouraged** play). Over time, it is possible that this type of immersion could alter a player’s perceptions of reality and the less a

player is able to distinguish the game world from the real world, the more damaging this type of game play could potentially become. Annie Lang, Director of the Institute for Communication Research at Indiana University states:

“[Video games] are encouraging violent solutions to problems as a motivational tool, and that is a different question than simple imitation or simple disinhibition, an interesting question. It opens up violence as a possibility to solve problems. So, if you are one of these high school kids and everyone hates you and you hate them and life sucks and you are depressed because your hormones are kicking in, then one possible solution – that you can just blow everybody away – might be more likely to occur to you” (Gillespie).

It is at least plausible to consider that repeated immoral acts in a game world could make these same acts seem more acceptable in real life. This brings the discussion back around to the previous question – Does morality (“good vs. evil”) exist in video games?

In order to have black, there must be white. For evil to exist, there must be good and vice versa. So, for video games to possess real morality, it must be determined whether or not it is possible to commit acts of good or evil in a game environment. Since actions in a game environment have no measurable real-world consequences, they could be assumed to be amoral, defined by *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* as “being neither moral nor immoral; specifically: lying outside the sphere to which moral judgments apply” (Merriam-Webster). After all, if morality is something that requires real-world consequences, and immersion is void of real-world consequences, then immersive media cannot be moral **or** immoral.

However, if the mind is able to exist concurrently in both the real and game worlds, then it may be possible for the mind to be affected by the actions performed in a game world. While no conclusive studies have been performed, it remains to be seen how the morality of play in



game worlds affects the player's mind. One study, performed by Dr. Vincent P. Mathews of the University of Indiana Medical School in Indianapolis, suggests the following:

“. . .repeated exposure to the violent video games is ‘desensitizing the brain. . . the result is that the child can no longer understand the real effect of violence,’ said Dr. Carol Rumach, professor of radiology and pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine in Denver” (Peck).

While adults should be assumed to be less affected than children, it is likely that, even though the body itself suffers no consequences of the morality of game play, the mind does not emerge unaffected.

Hans-Georg Gadamer states that “play is self-presentation” (Gadamer 108). If this is true, what does the play of a society say about them? Before its fall, the Roman Empire had sunk to the point of killing for play. People would pack the coliseum to watch as human lives were destroyed for the sake of entertainment. What if the Romans had access to *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*? Would they have been content to sustain their lust for blood in a game world instead of the real world? Many see game violence as therapeutic, while others claim it to be self-destructive and desensitizing. If it is therapeutic, then it is frightening that humans are so corrupt that they desire death and destruction. On the other hand, if it is self-destructive, then it is equally as frightening to imagine how corrupt game player's minds will become when exposed to greater and greater amounts of ever more increasingly immersive games. Either way, it might prove true that immersive media that distorts real-world morality is not healthy. But what can be done to remedy this distortion?

It is doubtful that it is necessary, or even plausible, to rid immersive media of immorality, but modifications could certainly be made to the ways in which moral structures are created.

Game worlds could be created within which players could make real-world moral decisions. Resolution to conflicts does not need to be limited to violence only. Why not allow the players more creative solutions to problems? And at the same time, there needs to be real-world consequences to immoral decisions in games that are attempting to mimic the real world. If a player decides to kill a prostitute in *GTA: Vice*, why not then have her pimp track the player down and try to kill him? This scenario seems fair enough, and quite likely “real” enough as well. This is where *Deus Ex* succeeded so well; it allows players to solve conflicts in non-violent ways, if they desire. It seldom forces a player to act in a violent manner. Unfortunately, controversial game content is no longer limited to just violence.

Violence has always been an issue in games, but the violence was present partially because it is one of the most basic elements of play. A target is shot and it reacts. But now, with advancements in technology and with the rise of more adult game players, some game content is becoming even more “adult.” *BMX XXX* includes actual video footage of real life strippers, crude sexual humor, nudity, and foul language. Does this sort of content make games more enjoyable for adults? It is a sad world if that is the case. Hopefully, this game is just a fad, a video game anomaly. Game players should demand more creative game play from developers. And developers should rise up to the challenge of creating compelling immersive media that will not rot the player’s brain.

In her book *Utopian Entrepreneur*, Brenda Laurel gives a unique and insightful view into the gaming industry. While many were simply content to sit idly by and watch it turn into a cesspool of immorality, Laurel saw the gaming industry as an opportunity to affect some positive

influence into the lives of young girls. Her software company, Purple Moon, ultimately failed, but its intent was worthy of merit. She states:

“Purple Moon was the crucible that forged my new outlook on the responsibilities of creative individuals to their culture. In the twenty-first century, design innovators must also become economic innovators; that a ‘new economy’ that doesn't confront issues of politics and ethics is as ‘old’ as child labor and poorhouses; that we can do better than always placing public benefit in opposition to private gain. . . [Utopian entrepreneurs] insist that practices and outcomes of business they build be harmonious with the public good, even when it's ethical or more profitable to do otherwise” (Laurel 6, 7).

In a market dominated by revenue (like every other market), Laurel's idea that game designers are “culture workers” is intriguing. That a person can retain her own system of values while influencing culture is a foreign concept in today's game industry. Most developers have found it easier to instead churn out the “crap” that is so terribly popular in today's other forms of visual media. AKA Acclaim, in one of their video promos on the *BMX XXX* web site, even jests “We're going to hell for this, and you're all coming with us.” How long will it be before the industry is saturated with games containing the immoral content of *GTA:Vice* and *BMX XXX*? Developers today have tremendous opportunity to create games that instill positive values in today's youth (and adults as well).

*Utopian Entrepreneur* is a battle cry for developers to consider the content of what they are putting into the hands of the public. Sure, it takes more effort to create games that have “clean” jokes, non-gratuitous violence, immersive storylines, and encouraging models of morality. But what **good** can be done through the technology used in today's video games? Can they only be used for target practice and picking up virtual prostitutes? It is quite discouraging if

that is the best use developers can find for video games. What does that say about creativity in general in the industry?

A battle cry has sounded a new generation of immersive game design. The industry needs games that make a difference. Games that make people, laugh, cry, and maybe even make people consider the consequences of their actions in the game world as well as in the real world.

Immersive media is not any more immoral than any other type of media, but it has the potential to do so much more than it does today. And as immersive media progresses, this potential for good or evil will grow exponentially along with the responsibility of its effects in society.

Mankind should hope and pray that the future of game development lies in the hands of those most capable to understand the moral implications of their creations. Good or evil, black or white, moral or immoral, the choice will be up to them. A choice not to be taken lightly.

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