Video Game Culture Does Not Promote Antisocial Behaviors

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The most violent video games reflect a cesspool of sexist, racist, and brutal tendencies, creating feelings of shame among some players. At the same time, however, gaming as a culture cannot be reduced to hate and violence. Video games have a complex interrelationship with the wider culture, beyond the negative behaviors of young men. Social gaming is on the rise, and the demographics of players are becoming more similar to society in general. Also, games that encourage collaboration and community involvement are a significant part of gaming and must be acknowledged. With the availability of video games on phones, tablets, and computers, gaming is becoming commonplace and will overtake the niche of hardcore gaming.

On the other side of my desk, a Razer Blade gaming laptop is singing that siren song I know so well. Play with me. Sleek and stylish, the Blade is heftier than a MacBook Air, but not by much. Accompanying promotional material promises that "the world's thinnest gaming laptop" delivers the most powerful "performance in its class" (think fast-jabbing welterweight, perhaps, as opposed to heavyweight big iron).

The Blade boasts good specs. The Intel processor is fast, the Nvidia graphics card is stout. Reviews have been mostly positive, though some critics have dinged it for its price ($1,799 for a Windows laptop that starts with only a 128 gigabyte solid state drive is a little steep) and the not quite state-of-the-art display. But the critic who lives in my house, my 15-year-old gamer son, has pushed the machine to its limits for two weeks and pronounced himself satisfied.

Too satisfied. He mourns the fact that the Blade was provided to me for review purposes, and must be returned. I understand the feeling. While he's off at school, my fingers itch at the sight of the Blade's green backlit keyboard. Take me for a spin, the Blade whispers. You know you want to.

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Solitary Play and Internalized Shame

I do, and I don't. As I contemplate the Blade, I can't get a sentence from a recent essay about the state of gaming culture out of my head. In "Poison Tree: A Letter to [video game character] Niko Bellie About Grand Theft Auto V," Tom Bissell, a writer whose gaming criticism I've read and enjoyed for years, recounts a crisis of faith in the guise of a missive addressed to "GTA V's" violence-prone, car-jacking-crazy protagonist. Although Bissell appreciates the masterly quality of "GTA V's" gameplay (ratified by the market to the tune of $1 billion in sales in just three days), his hours riding through the mean streets of Los Angeles have sparked an impressive outbreak of self-loathing.
Solitary play can feel especially shameful, and we gamers have internalized that vaguely masturbatory shame, even those of us who've decided that solitary play can be profoundly meaningful. Niko, I've thought about this a lot, and internalized residual shame is the best explanation I have to account for the cesspool of negativity that sits stagnating at the center of video-game culture, which right now seems worse than it's ever been.

I kind of know what Bissell is talking about. I am familiar with cesspool, reflective of so much of the Internet's worst misogynist, homophobic and racist tendencies. That "internalized residual shame" is one reason why I personally gave up gaming. Solitary play, hacking and slashing, mowing down opponents in a rage of slaughter, just didn't seem physically or mentally healthy. So I packed it in. Now I worry about what all the time my son spends gaming might be doing to him. Hell, I worry about what a generation growing up on ubiquitous, amazingly immersive gaming will do to the culture at large. Something, surely? A billion dollars was just spent in three days on a game whose structure encourages random violence and brutality. That can't be good.

And yet, at the same time, I don't know what Bissell is talking about at all. Video gaming culture should not, cannot, be reduced to young men screaming profanities as they play "Grand Theft Auto V" on their dedicated consoles. Gaming, today, encompasses much, much more. My son and his friends spend hours in the cooperative, creative world-building domain of "Minecraft" or chuckling their way through humor-drenched indie games like "Don't Starve" ("An uncompromising wilderness survival game full of science and magic"). More broadly, the explosion of mobile and social gaming has sucked all genders and ages into the gaming domain. Increasingly, it seems weird to even talk about "gaming culture." It's the culture, period, and we're becoming more sophisticated in how we think about and navigate it by the minute. Yes, there are cesspools. But they can be avoided.

Gaming as a Narrative Vehicle

I am watching my son and his best friend watch two actors onstage in San Francisco in a play called "The Video Game Monologues." The scene is set in a subway car. A young man is surreptitiously eyeing a young woman beside him while she plays a game on her phone. He is delighted to see that she is playing one of his favorite games, a gothic-styled world-creation game called "Dark Manor." He's trying to work up the courage to speak to her, but wrestling with whether any overture might be rejected as intrusive or creepy. Until the very last moment, the tension builds.

The monologue is sweet and funny—a mobile-game-inflected twist on a classic moment of how-to-break-the-ice angst. We've all been there. I was struck by how obviously and intimately it spoke to the teenagers I had brought to the play. On the one hand, they were intrigued by the game; after the play, they told me it sounded like something they would like to play. But they also caught the plot. My son's friend immediately saw himself in the place of the shy young man, incredibly knowledgeable about games but extraordinarily tentative in matters of romance. He bought the narrative like a fish accepts water.

Written and directed by a woman, Lian Amaris, "The Video Game Monologues" is a slyly perceptive set of discourses on relationships embedded in gaming culture. As far as gaming cred
goes, cameos by "Halo," "Words With Friends," "Dance Dance Revolution" and "Portal" were deemed "totally legit" by my son. But the games were not the action. Amaris' clear intent was to use gaming as a narrative vehicle to show how our new digital ways of play plug into the oldest stories that we've always told about each other.

So there was a meditation on aging in the form of a preschooler playing shark games on her tablet with her nursing-home grandmother. There was a father bemoaning his failure to pay proper attention to his first-person-shooter-addicted son, who has apparently committed some horrific act of mass murder. There was a girlfriend struggling not to over-kibbitz her boyfriend's stumble through some Super-Mario-like labyrinth. There may have been some cesspools lurking in the distance, but overall, the vibe was positive and affirming; a demonstration of how our life with games has real meaning.

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As such, "The Video Game Monologues" could be accused of not perfectly reflecting current reality. When I spoke to Amaris the day after the show, she acknowledged that "The Video Game Monologues" "is not a true ethnography."

"It's obviously a collection of realistic and magical fictions," said Amaris, who has master's degrees in both Performance Studies and Interactive Telecommunications. "As a show, it is designed to create a different perspective on the gaming experience and what's possible."

Reducing the state of gaming culture to "Grand Theft Auto V," said Amaris, would be like choosing one book, or one movie, to define the state of literature or film. But gaming culture, in toto, is a fast-moving, broadly sprawling target.

"People have been worried about the moral and ethical decline of video games for a long time," said Amaris, "but the mobile game boom is redefining what gamers are and what gaming culture is and it is changing old stereotypes. The kinds of gaming experiences that are out there are so varied and appeal to so many different audiences. It's a vastly different landscape than you had just a few years ago."

The most recent statistics available from the Entertainment Software Association back Amaris up. As the relative percentage of console and PC gamers has declined, mobile and social gaming has shot up—and the gender and age breakdown of gamers has become more similar to society's demographics at large. Fifty-five percent of gamers are still men, but as a percentage of all gamers, there are more women 18 and older playing games than there are men 17 and younger.

Which makes gaming culture's interrelationship with the culture more complicated than unsightly displays of bad behavior by young men would suggest.

"I genuinely believe that video games are important cultural artifacts that can help define the content of our character, just as much as exposure to a book or a movie," says Amaris, who has a day job as director of user engagement for Glu Mobile, a mobile gaming company. "In my own
But Amaris' art goes further. By using the language of games to talk about the human condition, Amaris brings gamers into the larger conversation, and collapses the boundaries that we set up between ourselves and those "others" who might be addicted to "Halo," or "GTA V" or "Angry Birds," or something completely different, like "Minecraft." New generations reared in an always-on, ubiquitous gaming environment will create and interpret their culture using gaming itself as a text. "The Video Game Monologues" is just a taste of what is to come.

**A Collaborative Ecosystem**

I am watching my son play "Minecraft," something he has done on and off for almost three years now. How does one best describe "Minecraft"? One popular shorthand is to think of it as kind of online Lego—a set of tools for building worlds made out of digital blocks. (This metaphor, however, has been complicated by the fact that in 2012 Lego started selling actual physically embodied Minecraft sets.) But you also have to imagine that the creators of Lego decided from the outset that anybody could design their own blocks and imbue them with any kind of special properties or powers that they could imagine, and then be encouraged to add those "mods" directly to the game. A critical part of "Minecraft"s enduring popularity is its openness to community involvement. Players are participants at many levels, in a fashion analogous to the sharing-friendly participatory structure of open-source software.

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Alex Leavitt, a Ph.D. student at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communications, is researching how "the norms and the philosophies of open source software apply to the development of media and the creative industries."

"Minecraft" is one of his case studies, an example of a "collaborative ecosystem" in which "audiences and consumers are changing into co-producers with the people who are creating either the game or the software."

"Minecraft" deserves to be included in any discussion of gaming culture as much as "Grand Theft Auto V," if only for its demonstration of how being part of a community of gamers can generate as much satisfaction and enjoyment as actually playing the "game." Search for "Minecraft" on YouTube and you will find millions of videos dedicated to the world of "Minecraft." Tutorials, tours, play-by-play recordings of how a particular world was built—my son has spent countless hours watching others play the game or teach the game in addition to playing the game itself. To a certain extent this is his TV.

"How we look at game culture," says Leavitt, "requires looking through the lens of the game itself: its particular style, the way you interact with it and the conversations about it."
"Minecraft' is open-ended," says Leavitt. "Your imagination is at the forefront of how you play the game. You are not forced to interact with the dialogues and discourses that 'Grand Theft Auto' literally shoves in your face, before you even play the game, just in the way it is advertised. In that sense, game culture is dictated by the game."

The platform and the mode of interaction make a big difference—something that explains why your grandmother might be willing to play a game on her iPhone while never daring to pick up an Xbox 360 game controller. So cool it with the cesspool naysaying: Games that encourage collaboration and community feed fountains of positivity.

In "A Letter to Niko," Tom Bissell laments the fact that an article written by a woman mildly critiquing "GTAV" received 20,000 mostly negative comments featuring the kind of hateful misogynist rhetoric all too common in contemporary online discourse. But why should it be surprising at all—or even depressing—that a game whose structure encourages and even rewards antisocial behavior nurtures a community that embodies similar, uh, values? So a game that targets young men and invites them to act out successfully attracts a horde of assholes! Something so predictable is hardly cause for despair, and it shouldn't serve as an indictment of video gaming culture writ large.

**We're All Gamers**

I'm mulling over that Razer Blade again. Just for old time's sake, I'm thinking. I could play the new Zerg campaign for "Starcraft II" that was released a few months back. Or I could splurge and buy that "Bioshock Infinite" game that seemed so interesting when it was getting heavily advertised. Or maybe I could try my own hand at "Minecraft."

But oddly, though I can appreciate how your typical 15-year-old hardcore gamer would desire a Razer Blade of his own with profound lust, to me, the machine looks a little quaint, a little obsolete. A dedicated gaming laptop? What isn't a gaming machine these days? I can play games on my phone, or on a tablet, or on any of my computers. Raw computing and graphics processing power might be important for playing the most bleeding-edge big budget new releases, but increasingly, the indie games that seem the most attractive or the mobile games that shoot up the app charts fastest are the games that put a premium on being clever or funny or interactive. The hardcore gamer is a niche, soon to be overwhelmed by a world in which, one way or another, we're all gamers. And that's all right.