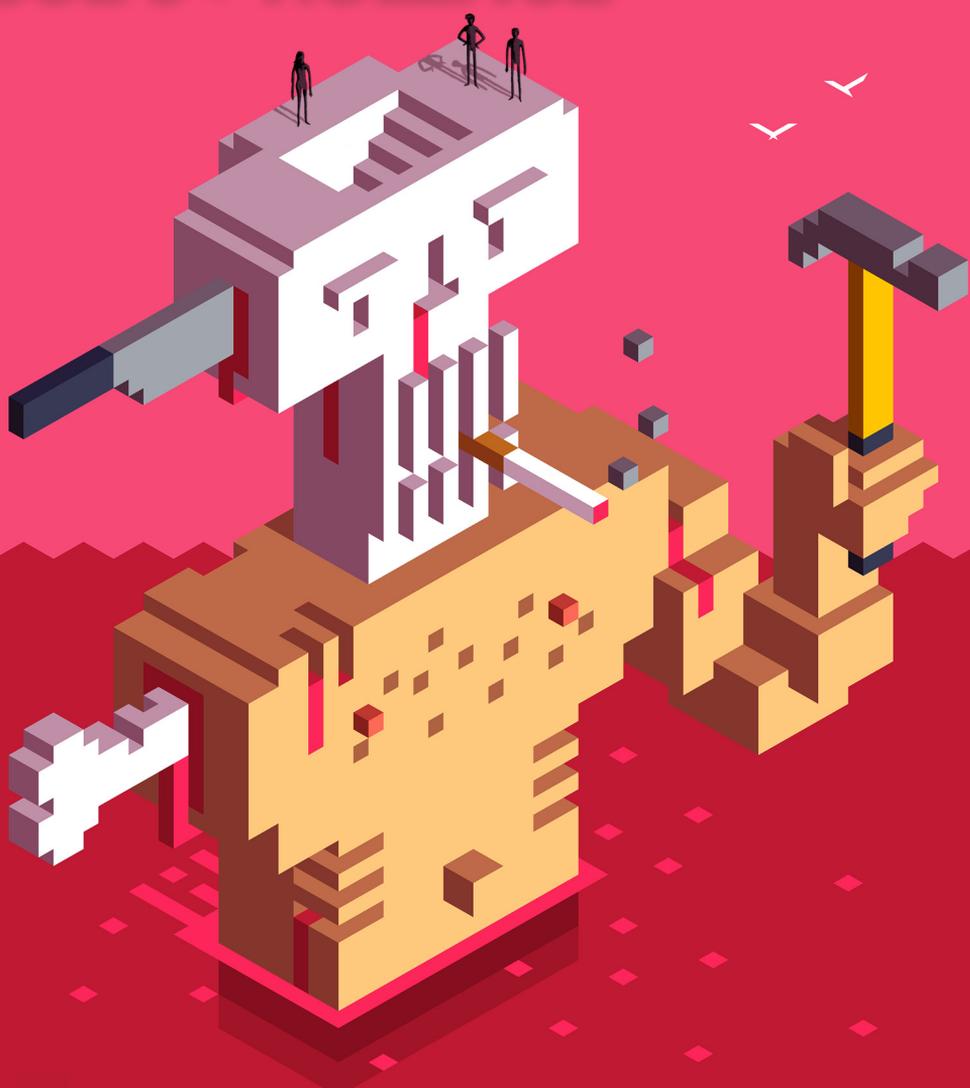


HAYWIRE MAGAZINE

ISSUE 5 • VIOLENCE



Violence and videogames go hand in hand.

It's a grossly reductionist view, if not an entirely erroneous claim, but still one commonly voiced by conservative media and politicians. It's one commonly challenged by videogame enthusiasts such as ourselves. As fans of the medium, we have all gotten very used to being its advocates too.

We explain the rationale of using violence as a simple, universally relatable source of conflict and death as a powerful motivator and obvious failure state. We observe that these themes are not unique to digital games, but can be found in a lot of human play, from Cops and Robbers to chess. We point to the amount of violent crime dwindling in perfectly indirect proportion to the popularity of videogames. We pick apart the biased or poorly executed studies funded by special interest groups. We conclude that violence and videogames are in no way connected.

And it's unreasonable to assume a simple, direct link. It's perfectly reasonable, on the other hand, to be defensive when this is what pundits propose, when you are accused of being this shadow industry profiting from the deaths of children. But our knee-jerk reaction of dismissing any kind of connection is ultimately as reductionist as the claims of the side that would ban this sick filth.

There is no evidence pointing towards a direct link between this one activity and aggressive behavior, and it seems unlikely that one should be found, but the honest answer is that we have not fully explored the relationship between videogames and violence. They might well be connected in ways more intricate and less insidious than the proposed one-to-one relationship between on-screen carnage and real life killing.

Videogames are increasingly recognized as an expressive medium, but that status brings as much responsibility as it does privilege. It means close scrutiny by Cultural Studies, Media Studies and all sorts of other studies. It means examining the values and systems games encode and perpetuate, considering their significance as cultural artifacts, looking at the rituals and communities emerging from them.

We need to get used to this critical attention. It's nice and comforting to think the tropes and ideologies in our entertainment are without deeper meaning, but it requires the snide dismissal of anything academia has had to say on the subject for 50 years at least. Worse, it means a step backwards, voluntarily choosing the belittling label of 'just games' that is only slowly peeling off our favorite pastime.

The fear of people taking away games for good seems to still be a prevalent notion in our circles. It's ridiculous to think it might not (yet) be entirely unfounded, but it needs to stop influencing our actions. Do not mistake these critical voices for indictment. Do not mistake proponents of equality and social activism for spoilsports come to ruin the fun of gaming.

This is not about the abolition of problematic content. It's about awareness.

Cheers,

Johannes Köller

Editor-in-Chief



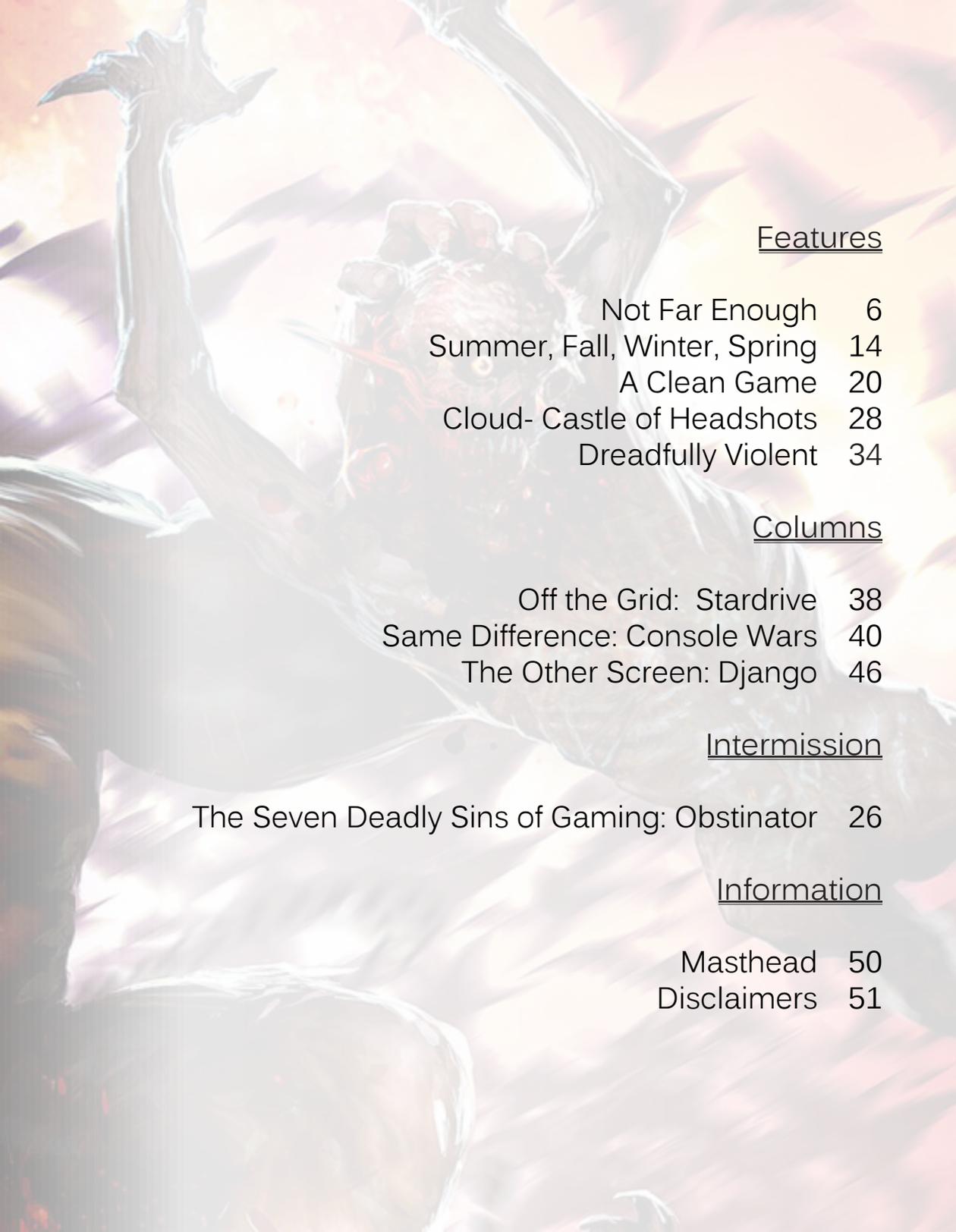
Kirk Hamilton at Kotaku was one of the first to criticize the excesses of *Bioshock Infinite*, specifically the mayhem of the game's Skyhook.



Splatterhouse, a 1988 arcade game which was called to be banned for its gore and violence, was rebooted in 2010.

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Not Far Enough

Far Cry 3 failed as satire. For Johannes Köller, it failed as social commentary too.



There's a lot you can criticize about *Far Cry 3*. Its excessive use of minigames and carnival distractions for instance, or the basic narrative of a white man colonizing the jungle, especially considering the bizarre mixture of ethnicities and accents it sells as 'exotic'. But according to lead writer Jeffrey Yohalem, these elements are to be seen as intentional parody: *Far Cry 3* is satire, its nonreflective violence and problematic portrayal of minorities merely comment on industry tendencies.

It's rather telling that Yohalem had to explicitly state this intention after the fact. Players don't seem to have interpreted *Far Cry 3* as satirical, and how could they? The game might copy many of the absurdities of our favorite medium, but it doesn't exaggerate them, doesn't overdo them, doesn't ridicule them. It's not satire by videogame standards: Where flat characters and excessive violence are generally presented in earnest, satirical takes like *Saints Row* need to go one step further, beyond good and evil. Adapting to videogames' skewed idea of normality is not the same as criticizing it, parody is about more than mere imitation and the supposed subtext of *Far Cry 3* blurs the lines between subtle and nonexistent.

But while *Far Cry 3* fails to comment on violence in videogame culture, it does offer an interesting perspective on its general fascination and its perception

in today's zeitgeist. Kill Screen aptly described it as "the first game about millenials," the spoiled generation of Jason Brody and his obnoxiously rich ilk, whose existence is defined by beach resorts, tanning beds and smartphones on the one hand, and unemployment, weltschmerz and various financial and personal crises on the other hand.

In a sense, Jason Brody's conquest of the jungle, his transformation to a superhuman predator, is merely the brutal, yet logical conclusion of his initial vacation plans. His booze-cruise was always about testing limits, about feeling alive again through various near-death experiences, in both a metaphorical and a physical sense. The vapid hedonist sampled every socially accepted option: alcohol, loud music, meaningless sex, drugs of all shapes and sizes, extreme sports, etc. Crash-landing on Rook Island simply gives him the opportunity to keep pushing boundaries as he moves from imitations of death to the real thing.

Why? Because this increasingly digital, artificial, fake world can leave you desperate to just feel something, anything at all. So long as it's something genuine, pure, real. Because violence scratches that itch, because it yanks you from the uncomfortably comfortable mundanity of modern life and presents you with arguably the most primordial human experience of all: you or me. Kill

or be killed.

Violence is power, power over another life and its untimely end. It's a tempting proposition considering the sheer number of things that have seemingly slipped beyond our control. Employment and financial security depend on a run-down economic system that even our capitalist overlords don't seem to fully understand. Love, by common understanding, is based around random encounters and luck of the draw.

Violence is wrong, yes, but it's also intimate. For somebody like Jason, it might well be the most significant human interaction of their entire life. It fills the void, meaningless existence of the confused manbaby. The kidnapping, his escape, the trapped friends he needs to save - these things are all just catalysts for the change in him, the initial push that leads him to realize that he's not only able to kill when forced to, he's actually pretty damn good at it. And he loves it.

Jason Brody kills for pleasure. It's an uncomfortable observation, but that's what makes it interesting, and not every game needs to be as moralizing about the flaws of its protagonist as *Spec Ops: The Line* was. It would be enough to

just present them, because even though the rapid decay of Jason's civilized shell might not be caused by the bloodlust infused in him by veteran gamers, as Yohalem claims, it does go hand in hand with our symbiotic enjoyment of the orgy of violence.

While *Far Cry 2* tried to portray the horrors of war by intentionally not being fun, *Far Cry 3* marks the series' triumphant return to the glories of modern escapism. Its arsenal of flavored lubes and buzzing toys shows the absurd

level of mastery we have reached when it comes to providing such masturbatory thrills, just how good we have gotten at orchestrating problematic power fantasies.

Far Cry 3 is fun. More importantly, *Far Cry 3* gets progressively

more enjoyable as you master its violent mechanics. While Jason slowly adapts to his surroundings and his newfound role becomes the aggressor, we as players are busy discovering the many interesting ways of dealing with the local pirates. As is frequently the case in such sandbox titles, the most brutal options just happen to be the most entertaining, too.

Having shed my spoilt, cowardly ways, I now stalk my foes with bow and

Jason Brody's conquest of the jungle is merely the brutal, yet logical conclusion of his initial vacation plans.

arrow, set fire to their outposts and burn them crisp, drive my machete through their chests, feed them to tigers, Komodo dragons, sharks and any other form of endangered, dangerous species. Just how quickly and easily good-for-nothing Jason discovers his knack for killing betrays the game-like nature of his exploits, but also serves to show the dark side hidden even in empty-headed, fun-loving cosmopolitans.

In this sense, Jason serves as an icon more so than as a fully-fleshed character. Consistency and depth are sacrificed to cast him as the incarnation of the young, carefree generation that might spend its endless hours of free time getting drunk in foreign countries or, yes, playing videogames. *Far Cry 3* might not be about videogames

specifically, but its protagonist definitely falls into their target audience. It's easy to envision Jason playing *Far Cry 3*, actually. Only now he gets to live out those power fantasies and all they entail, a premise that brings *Far Cry 3* close to offering observant commentary on society's fascination with violence, if it

wasn't so damn set on explaining away his inconvenient bloodlust.

Jason Brody kills to save his friends, that's the idea. Though if you're anything like me, you'll have forgotten their bland, empty faces the second your captivating captor Vaaz Montenegro first appears on screen roughly five minutes into the game. The superficial relationships of this gang of cardboard cutouts never even come close to being as interesting as *Far Cry 3*'s enigmatic villain, or the chaos of its jungle. Every second you spend in the relative safety of their cave hideout, you'll find yourself itching to head back out for more firefights, more explosions, more tigers.

There's this scene halfway through *Far Cry 3*: Jason has just returned triumphantly to the cave hideout,

when his newly rescued friend reveals that Jason's brother Riley was killed. He pauses, and for the second time the game expects you to react to the death of a brother it never really introduced to you. Meanwhile, I'm having trouble matching the name to one of the faces from the intro. Which of these kids was

Far Cry 3 shows the absurd level of mastery we have reached when it comes to providing masturbatory thrills, just how good we have gotten at orchestrating problematic power fantasies.

“Painting his fascination with violence as a compulsive obsession is too simple, it ignores how shockingly normal Jason still is.”





Riley again?

After receiving the tragic news, Jason ends up talking to another one of his pothead friends and asks him, presumably to dull the pain, if he can have a puff, too. He declines: Jason needs to keep a clear head to get them off this island. Even if I'm not generally inclined to read *Far Cry 3* as satire, that has to be a joke. A clear head? Me? Buddy, I'm on the trip of the century over here. Keep your joint then, I'm high as a kite on blood and adrenaline.

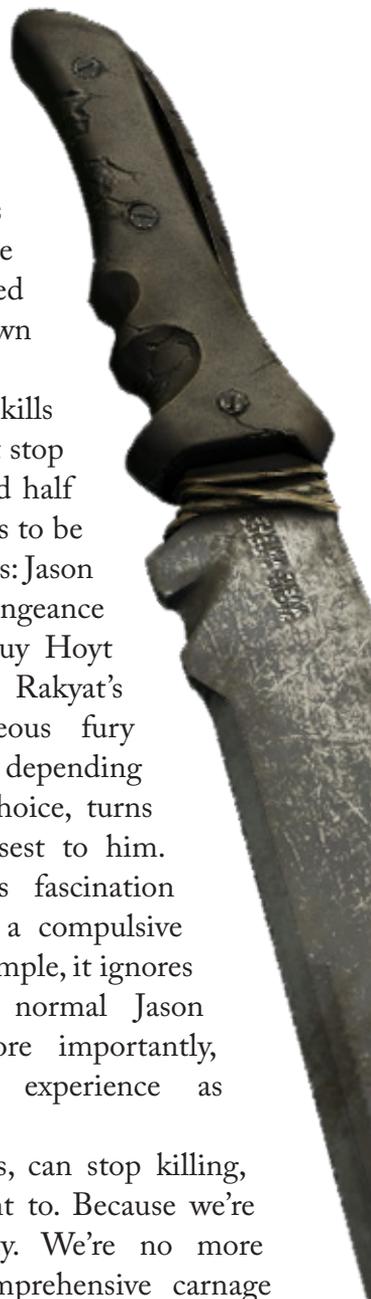
Jason's transition to new, harder drugs is shown best through his assault on the pirates' cannabis fields, a scene that will stick in mind not just for its driving dubstep tunes, but its strong thematic beats. Before the crash, discovering the fields of green would presumably have rendered Jason ecstatic, he would have spent the next few days baked at the beach, blowing his own brains out. Now Brody is cheering and giggling as he puts the splendor to the torch, soaking in the destruction and not the fumes. He's found something far more intoxicating than weed, his new drug is just arriving in the shape of enraged pirate guards.

Considering the gleefully violent excess of this scene, it's hard to argue Jason is merely doing what needs to be done to keep his friends safe. Fortunately *Far Cry 3* has another explanation for his strange behavior ready: After

claiming that he was forced to kill by circumstance, it now begins to argue that he is literally forced to kill, by his own deluded psyche.

Jason Brody kills because he cannot stop killing. The second half of *Far Cry 3* seems to be based on this thesis: Jason vows bloody vengeance on backup bad guy Hoyt Volker, joins the Rakyat's war with righteous fury and ultimately, depending on the player's choice, turns against those closest to him. But painting his fascination with violence as a compulsive obsession is too simple, it ignores how shockingly normal Jason still is and, more importantly, contradicts our experience as partners in crime.

We, as players, can stop killing, we just don't want to. Because we're all crazy? Hardly. We're no more interested in comprehensive carnage than Jason Brody is. We both just want to blow off steam, and while we need to make do with fiction, he goes one step further. Like William Foster in *Falling Down*, he simply starts doing



all the things decent people rightly stop themselves from doing - not because he's not aware of the consequences, but because he doesn't care. What's so truly monstrous about Jason is that, despite all the colorful pills and shots, he's still perfectly lucid. He's not crazy, he's fully aware of his own actions. He doesn't have to kill, but he can. Whenever he wants.

Far Cry 3 isn't even willing to see its own idea of an obsessive mass murderer through to the bitter end. Instead, the game keeps pushing you into ever more defensive roles the more brutal it gets. You defend your plane, hold positions, guard your comrade. Even the final helicopter ride, several minutes of exorbitant death and destruction, is technically, by game logic, self-defense. If you don't partake in the turret section, you are quickly shot down. To see that as the justification for excessive retaliation is nonsense, but it seems the game wants to provide some rationale for your actions even now, with Jason this far gone.

Ultimately, *Far Cry 3* is both indecisive and inconsistent when it comes to its own protagonist, and this makes it hard to say what message,

if any, can be gleaned from the game. *Far Cry 3* is absurd. It might even be aware of its own absurdity, but despite self-adulation as a systemic critique of videogames, it's more interested in maintaining the illusion of its all-inclusive adventure trip than it is in breaking it. For the purpose of your own relaxation, you are asked to ignore the walls and borders of this island resort. Barring some grand effort on their own part, players will stay naive tourists, just like Jason Brody.

Despite Jeffrey Yohalem's claims, I can't see *Far Cry 3* as metacommentary. The game might be excessively violent, but the idea that the mere existence of violence in videogames inevitably leads to its contemplation, would have the medium consuming itself in an endless, fundamental debate since its very inception. But if you ignore this speculative level, all that remains of *Far Cry 3* is a slightly self-deprecating power fantasy, varying between extremes and too cowardly to openly criticize anything.

HW



Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring

Joel and Ellie's year of survival and brutality made one of the most profound statements on violence in games.

By Andrew Huntly

Nathan Drake has killed a lot of people.

In any other medium, Drake would be considered a sociopath at best and a war criminal at worst. His nearest contemporary, film's Indiana Jones, also has a hefty bodycount, but it doesn't even come close to the pile of corpses Nathan Drake has accumulated over

the course of five *Uncharted* games. If ever there was a posterchild for the term 'ludonarrative dissonance', it would be Mr. Drake. It's a testament to Naughty Dog's writing chops that our impression of him is that of a witty, energized adventurer rather than a mad, self-centered killer.

And it speaks even more to the writing of Naughty Dog that *The Last of Us* completely overcomes what *Uncharted* never did. Its lead protagonists Joel and Ellie also kill, and in far more violent fashions than anything Nathan Drake could ever conjure up. Throughout their adventure, they shoot people, they stab people (repeatedly), they beat people with both blunt instruments and their hands, they set people on fire, they strangle people and they straight up execute people. And yet, the level of violence adds to the story and characters in ways that few games even dare try to execute.

Set 20 years in the future, *The Last of Us* shows humanity in ruins after the outbreak of a deadly fungal infection. The surviving populace lives in militarized quarantine zones, unaffected areas of major American cities. While the infection is kept at bay, the inhabitants are their own worst enemy, forming loose gangs centered around a currency of ration cards and munitions. When something goes wrong, things quickly descend to violence. The beginning of the game tasks Joel with hunting down the man who stole a gun shipment from him, brutalizing his way through to gather

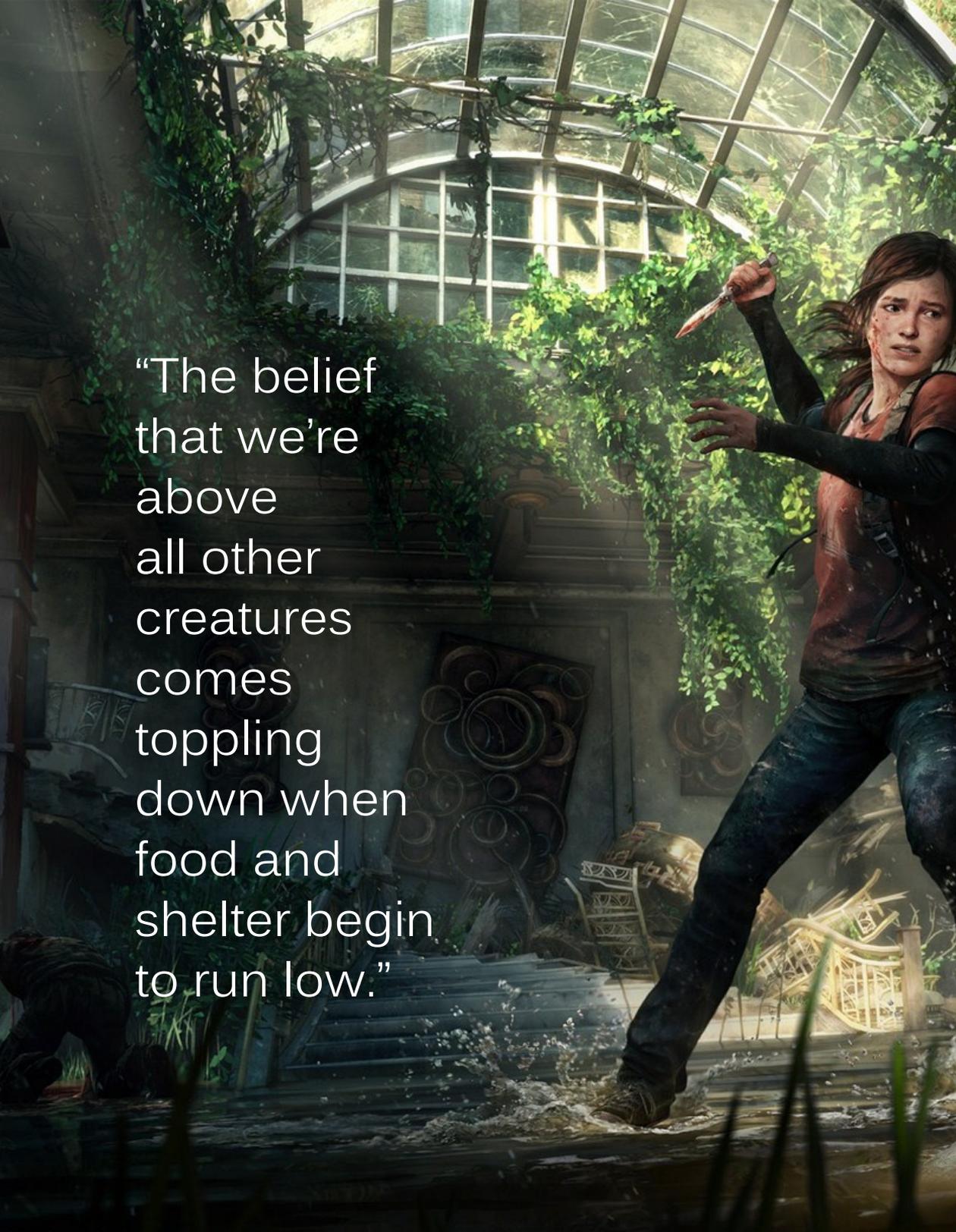
further tools of violence.

This is the game at its least justifiable in regards to force. It breaks down the acts of gunplay and stealth kills into tutorials, marring immersion with button prompts splashed on the screen. It doesn't take long before these more overtly game-like elements are dropped. Removed from this instructional phase, violence in *The Last of Us* is unflinching, graphic and brutal. The small taps on the controller produce moments of unparalleled viciousness. Never has a melee system felt so crunchy and satisfying, whilst also being so repulsive and gruelling.

Killing is neither a pleasurable nor a cathartic experience, but it feels necessary.

Unlike last year's *Spec Ops: The Line* however, *The Last of Us* does not aim to shame or

criticize what it portrays, and instead uses violence as an honest tool to flesh out its world and characters. Joel is not your traditional idea of a good person, even the word 'antihero' is something of a stretch. But he is a believable, well realized character and the violence he performs on other people is a natural part of the world as he and Ellie know it. Killing is not a pleasurable nor a cathartic experience, but it feels necessary. It doesn't feel good, and at times feels genuinely unpleasant,

A cinematic still from the video game The Last of Us Part II. The character Ellie is shown from the waist up, positioned on the right side of the frame. She is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt under a red t-shirt, and blue jeans. Her face has some blood splatters. She is holding a combat knife in her right hand, raised as if ready for action. Her left hand is extended forward. She is standing on a wooden floor that is partially submerged in water, with splashes around her feet. The background is a large, arched greenhouse filled with lush green vines and plants. Sunlight filters through the glass panes, creating a bright, dappled light effect. In the lower-left corner, the back of another person's head and shoulders is visible, looking towards the center. The overall atmosphere is tense and dramatic.

“The belief
that we’re
above
all other
creatures
comes
toppling
down when
food and
shelter begin
to run low.”



but the story and context ground it so heavily that there is meaning and weight in every little act of bloodshed. The fact that it's so natural to Joel never feels like the realization of a power fantasy, but rather enhances the frightening reality of this world and how it's shaped his character. When choking an enemy to death, he slaps Joels arms with deadening hands, his eyes bulging wide and a croaking gasp breaking from his lips. All you wish is for it to be over.

What's truly interesting is how this level of violence purposefully clashes with the landscape of *The Last of Us*. Most post-apocalyptic visions concern themselves with dry, barren wasteland. The world of McCarthy's *The Road* has no vegetation. The *Fallout* games are similarly sparse, even their water being undrinkable. Meanwhile, the America presented in *The Last of Us* simply doesn't care that humanity is dying and carries on, business as usual. Vegetation is lush, crawling up buildings and scattering the streets. Marshes have formed where roads once were. Forests are teeming and bursting with life. Animals of all shapes and all sizes are thriving, roaming in herds across this beautiful world, in which humans are slaughtering and eating one another just for another few days of life. It's an animalistic portrayal of the remnants of society, and this further enforces the graphic violence. The belief that we're

above all other creatures comes toppling down when food and shelter begin to run low.

We frequently see complaints, from inside the industry as much as out, that games are far too violent. That the focus is always on violence, the gameplay objectives always revolving around the act of killing. But *The Last of Us* brings up an interesting point - perhaps the issue of violence in games isn't its quantity, but its honesty. *The Last of Us* is an extraordinarily violent game, its depiction of death unflinching. But it's always grounded, always mired in its troubling and dark story. There is no sense of relief to killing, nor any sense of condemnation. The violence is true to the characters and true to the themes of the game. This is not about catharsis, it's about using a familiar tool to tell an unfamiliar story.

It's a bold move from Naughty Dog. The overall excellence of the *Uncharted* games overcame their disconnect between the witty hero and the cold murderer, but *The Last of Us* brought the characters and the violence together. Joel and Ellie are both thoroughly likable, but both are flawed, sculpted by a messy world that forces people into acts that are as despicable as they are frighteningly necessary. They, like Nathan Drake, have killed a lot of people. But it all meant something.





A Clean Game

Francisco Dominguez considers football's capacity to get blood boiling, and running.



One of the benefits of spectator sports is their ability to relieve factional tension. In allowing impeccably behaved representatives of specific regions or countries to compete in a fair contest, any historical tension or animosity vanishes as both sides are swept up by enthusiasm and sportsmanship. At least, that's how many football games pretend it works.

Truthfully, on and off the pitch, violent impulses have never been fully channelled into a wholesome spectacle of discipline and ability. Violence occurs regularly, fuelled by adrenaline on the pitch and alcohol in the stands. It can happen on any occasion. I've seen aggressive opposition fans try to start fights at pre-season friendlies, matches of no consequence attended more by families than by threatening hooligan outfits. And when a meaningful prize is at stake? The amount of weaponry confiscated by the Italian police at the Coppa Italia final a few weeks ago demonstrates the extent of the issue rather... pointedly.

As for the players, where to begin? With Liverpool's Luiz Suarez biting an opponent last April? With Chelsea's Eden Hazard kicking a ballboy? At least those actions didn't affect the result. But what about Joey Barton? Manchester City's dramatic win in the final seconds of the 2011/12 season, a result which gave them the title, can be partly

credited to him, even though Barton played for the opposition, Queen's Park Rangers. During a tense match, the score 1-1, Barton reduced his side to ten men after pointlessly kicking one Manchester City player and trying to headbutt another. The game finished 3-2 to City, his teammates' efforts valiant but unsustainable.

Meanwhile, even those with no interest in football know about Zinedine Zidane's headbutt, which led to his dismissal in the 2006 World Cup final between Italy and France. Italy's defensive resilience was regarded as the footballing basis for their triumph that year, but when one of the world's finest penalty takers - and post-war footballers overall - removes themselves from the deciding match, fortune deserves an equal amount of credit.

You can see how violence is more than a superficial blemish on football matches. These actions can define sporting history as much as any exquisite individual moment of skill. Yet football's most visible games, *FIFA* and *Pro Evolution Soccer*, prefer to ignore this side of the sport. They may present preludes to violence in skippable cutscenes - the snarls, the macho posturing - but nothing more.

Why is this? Well, on the developer's end, the rows of corporate logos that fill the screen whenever you start the game present many pressing



◀◀◀ Police in Italy confiscated these weapons at the Coppa Italia football final just a few weeks ago.

reasons. Sponsorship depends on public perception of the product, and modern football's marketing has tried to distance itself from its violent past since the vast influx of television revenue in the early 90s. FIFA, the game's dubious custodians, have no interest in tarnishing their improbably expanding, pan-continental asset. In its current form, sponsors, television networks, politicians and royalty all prostrate themselves before the commercial owners of this idea. Presenting it as a social menace simply won't sell, while the current approach works perfectly: Viewer estimates for the 2010 World Cup final fall between 700 million and 1 billion, a match surpassed only by the 1.1 billion who watched 2011's Cricket World Cup match between India and

Pakistan.

For once publishers like EA and Konami become the modest, diminutive partners in this relationship. To FIFA, these licensed games are just an extension of their global image, which fund a few limousine rides. To EA, the official license has been what sustains colossal *FIFA* sales. Even during the periods when its competitor *PES* was regarded as having superior gameplay, it always suffered from featuring alternative superstar players like David... Bickham?

Non-violence is not a moral decision here, just a decision in line with a hugely successful marketing approach. Football doesn't really do morals, willing as it is to advertise alcohol to children, or extremely high-interest loan companies

in deprived areas. As of yet, violence occupies no profitable legal grey-area and can be jettisoned without concern. Not that the attempt to sell football violence hasn't been made. Point of View had a go with 2002's *RedCard*, introducing exaggerated tackles and power shots, but never returning for a sequel. *Mario Strikers* later had more success with similar mechanics and no litigious, image-conscious footballers to appease.

Real violence, to the extent that FIFA would permit, simply isn't a selling point, perhaps seen as tainting by players as well as executives. Enough debate already followed Konami's decision to bring diving to its football series, *Pro Evolution Soccer*, in 2007. Despite how difficult it was to execute a successful dive in a meaningful position,

to some, including the option to cheat was tantamount to endorsement.

Last year's edition of *FIFA* sold 15 million copies, so ignoring football's darker reaches clearly has its benefits. It's debatable if violence could even be a worthwhile mechanical addition. Imagine *Devil May Cry* if Dante could pause his balletic butchery to give demons a backrub. Including violence introduces a similar disruption into a football game's flow. Football has its own perfectly effective mechanics already in place. In possession? Pass and move, pass and move. Lose possession? Pull back, harry and tackle. Violence breaks that rhythm.

Plus there's the issue of implementation. The option to attack an opposing player with a single button press would not only be open to abuse,

2002's
RedCard >>>>
made an attempt to
incorporate football
violence into its
football gameplay.



but worse, be completely fraudulent. Violence on a football pitch rarely comes from a rational place, there's hardly a clear advantage to be gained. A truthful effort to implement this side of the game would use systemically generated impulses, and players would hardly accept being penalized for actions they didn't choose to make.

That's how *Football Manager*, the one successful refuge for violence in football games, handles it. Sports Interactive's series won't even tell you openly who the mostly likely offenders are, the statistics governing the likelihood to cheat or become aggressive to others are part of a player's "hidden stats." Sometimes scouts and coaches will hint at these tendencies, otherwise you'll be taken by surprise at the worst possible moment during a match. In a game powered by probabilities and generated outcomes, these scenarios are acceptable.

Football Manager earns a unique exemption from the normal conduct of football games. Sure, it's licensed, but abstract matches performed by crude 3D models cause less legal provocation. Less attention is paid to the personality and likeness of the players, and more to the player decisions and the many systems. Just look at the cover art. *FIFA* and *PES* compete for famous players to put on their covers every year. *Football Manager* uses an anonymous figure in a suit, face cut off above the nose.

I can't see how football games would benefit from violence, but then I grew up with these games, their own orthodoxy had been established long before I came to them. The current criteria for rule breaking in direct input sports games appears to me as such: they must be condensed into a skillful mechanic where execution is hard, and failure heavily penalized. They must be dependent on player action, not the internal whims of a virtual character. They can't overly disrupt the flow of a game.

Some of these are solid design decisions that optimize the game's flow. Others establish a sterile marketer's idea of football instead of its reality. Violence is something unlikely to ever be fully eradicated from sport, regardless of official condemnation. Absolute replication never was the goal, but should sanitization be the only viable road?

HW



01 WINS

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KUNG LAO

Write
for us!

Contact us at haywiremagazine@gmail.com

Intermission...

The Seven Deadly Sins of Gaming: Obstinater

You've been waiting in that spot for an hour now. Can we move on?

It's for an achievement, is it? Well, that's OK I guess, how much longer do we have to wait?

No, seriously.

Is this like the time where we had to rescue all the red beetles from the chamber of rainbow beetles?

It's hardly my fault I hadn't unlocked the Insect Faction at that point.

So, just twenty more minutes killing these people and we can move on?

Cool - I'll just put my sentry down here then.

I can't? Why ever not?

Everyone has to be shot? What happens when we run out of bullets?

Well, of course I didn't bring my ammo backpack along with me on this trip to the shops.

I'm the idiot?

Fine, go then.

It's not my fault that we only had 60 people to take on the Sleeper, or that we couldn't find the floor pattern in *Payday*, or that we didn't have the Golden Potato in *Killing Floor*, or that I didn't want to wait two hours in *Braid*.

I didn't want to sleep in the bedroom anyway!

[Peanut Gallery: Etherea



26

Coach



Ellis



Nick

Signs of the Fourth Sin

- 1 · Achievements are a sidequest, not the point of the game.
- 2 · Cooperative games often require cooperation.
- 3 · Competitive games often require competition.
- 4 · Just because a Wiki says it's there doesn't mean it is.
- 5 · There is no cow level.
- 6 · You've got to catch 151, not 649.
- 7 · "Faction Rating" is developer code for "Timesink."

Like the Fourth Circle, the Third Circle of Gaming Hell doesn't exist. Oh, you'll hear rumours of its existence, and those of the Second Circle will always tell you of the terrors of the Third. How it can only be reached by those Obstinators who are able to 100% everything. How there are so few True Obstinators that can ever reach that wondrous place.

The Second Circle has a motto. It simply states "Vos Furor?"

HW

[Fanfare]



+47

Cloud-Castle of Headshots

Bioshock Infinite garnered a lot of criticism for the excess of its core mechanic. Johannes Köller examines the case.

It's not terribly surprising that a high-profile title like *Bioshock Infinite* splits opinions as Moses split the sea. At least, once the initial wave of enthusiasm subsided, seeing how unusual it still is for games to be inspired by art, history and art history over cheap action flicks or science fiction and fantasy novels. Oh, but then people start to notice the cracks in the facade of this brave new world and critical voices are raised.

But if the debate itself came as no surprise, then its tenor might have. Instead of obsessing over the game's weak attempt at metacommentary, critics focused on the themes *Infinite* marginalized: violence, racism, patriotism, evangelism. What has proven especially controversial is the question of why such an evidently clever game needed to be pressed into the FPS mold.

Let's rewind: It all began with Kirk Hamilton, Chris Plante and Michael Abbott (among many others), who opined that the amount of blood, gore and decapitations in *Infinite* is at odds with its heady narrative. Jim Sterling disagreed, arguing that *Infinite* was fundamentally about violence, its

protagonist, Booker, being a man of violence who's simply practicing his craft. Jeff Kunzler went so far as to assume that the calls for more non-violent exploration were based on the desire to be allowed to leave the racist utopia Columbia intact.

These counterarguments misunderstand that the initial criticism was never about turning *Infinite* into some sort of pacifist flower simulation.

Though the sheer amount of it is of some concern, this debate was never about there being violence, but there not being any thematic contemplation of the same. In *Infinite*, you shoot people. A lot of people. You shoot well-adjusted citizens and revolutionaries both, tear up faces

with your skyhook and pop heads with your electric superpowers. Neither the dimension, nor the distribution of this bloodbath serves any sort of ulterior message, it is merely thrown in for the sake of our amusement.

Infinite's fictitious account might seem positively harmless compared to the real atrocities committed during the era of racially-motivated violence it depicts, but choosing massacres as

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“Excessive violence is not the
to portray excessive violence.”



best way



its main mechanic is not the way to do these historic extremes justice. As bizarre as it might sound, excessive violence is not the best way to portray excessive violence. Repetition does not make it more and more shocking and absurd, but more and more normal, banal. The narrative charge of blood and guts is quickly spent.

Images of suffering and death are more affecting the more personal and relatable they are. Consider Telltale's zombie epic *The Walking Dead*: Over the course of the game, protagonist Lee Everett does not only kill hordes of undead, but, depending on player input, might end the lives of some of the few remaining survivors as well. These scenes are memorable not for their frequency or complex mechanics, but the exact opposite. Because the proposed action is so simple and the characters so familiar, the decision to kill them becomes a damning sentence: You have murdered this person.

What's more concerning than the sheer, violent excess of *Infinite's* repetitive combat though, is the fact that it doesn't serve the narrative in any way. The fighting is a mechanic end unto itself, occupational therapy for *Infinite's* players, whose interest apparently needs to be held with regular doses of adrenalin. For a medium based

on play, the desire to be entertaining as well as engaging is understandable, but it's harmful to consider it an inalienable necessity.

Infinite fails to connect gameplay and narrative in any meaningful ways. Instead of drawing its frontlines around the conflicting worldviews clashing in these skies, the game spreads its carnage equally across all factions. It discards political themes to focus entirely on Columbia's royal family and its disjointed quantum fairytale. In the end, *Infinite* is about neither violence, nor politics, nor religion. It's about Booker DeWitt, the tragedy of a single man.

Such careless disregard for its setting is especially disappointing considering the series' history: While Columbia is reduced to mere set dressing for an interdimensional family feud, the failed, submarine utopia of Rapture was always the real star of the original *Bioshock*. The moment you arrive in the city, it's already in ruin. Why? Because the ideology it's based on - full deregulation, absolute personal freedom achieved at the cost of community - must inevitably fail. Players don't just passively observe these twisted ideals, but adapt to the broken system with plasmids, a means of buying power by sacrificing more and more of your own humanity.

This premise alone contains more salient political commentary than the entirety of *Infinite*, which actually portrays militant rebellion against a system of racist oppression and institutionalized violence as equally questionable as said system, and places DeWitt, as the avatar of our enlightened future morals, firmly above both. He gets to enjoy plasmid magic without any adverse effects, continues to grow in power regardless of the evolution, stagnation or regress of his own morals, and never gets in the embarrassing situation of having to clarify his own views on this uprising. Both sides consider him an enemy - sometimes for poorly constructed reasons - so he ends up standing neither for oppression nor for liberty.

It's hard to read this as anything other than a cowardly endorsement of centrism and political inertia, and even that requires you to ignore the fatalist implications of *Infinite's* multiverse mechanics, which stipulate that every possible version of this class struggle must exist in one of its many dimensions. Some of them have failed, are failing, will fail. Others were successful, are successful, will be successful.

Perhaps it's *Bioshock Infinite's* biggest quantum-mechanical stunt that the game is loaded with violence, and

still has nothing to say on the matter. It bridges the gaps in its plot with gunfights to please the masses, but rather than using them for any narrative purpose, the story ends up having to justify their existence with a historical setting that remains largely unexplored and a protagonist whose violent past could have been established through less excessive means.

And so *Bioshock* managed to once again raise questions about the nature of our medium with *Infinite*, though I doubt they were the ones it intended to raise. Chief among the concerns: Why shooters? Why is shooting still the one, singular mechanic that even profound period pieces need to bow to? Why does every problem need to be examined from the barrel of a gun? Is there no other way, no better way?

It's not that the whole world suddenly decided to loathe action games, but the highly anticipated *Bioshock Infinite* offered the perfect example for discussing the disconcerting lack of alternative mechanics. The game promised the shrewd caricature of historical politics and the simultaneous meditation of their underlying themes. What did we end up with? Just another shooter. Such is the damning verdict of wasted potential.

Dreadfully Violent



Tosy Mahapatra on
the nature of fear.

To some, *Resident Evil 6* was an enjoyable, if in no way remarkable action game. To others, like myself, it was another disgraceful addition to a franchise losing sight of its survival horror past. From an outside perspective, such complaints about tradition must seem petty. Despite any genre-bending, games like *Resident Evil 6* and *Dead Space 3* remain very similar

to their predecessors, carrying many of the same horror tropes and motifs. But the inclusion of these themes does little to create fear when revised mechanics and narratives undermine the spooky atmosphere.

Contrasting conceptions of power and agency are one of the key differences between action and horror, and nowhere is this more clear than

in their use of violence. Action games like *Call of Duty* make their players the central agent of violence. Whatever the scenario and objective, their protagonists will overcome any obstacle by force. Some games, like *Spec Ops: The Line*, comment on the morals of using violence as this all-purpose solution, but even they mostly keep to portraying their protagonist's capacity for inflicting pain as empowering.

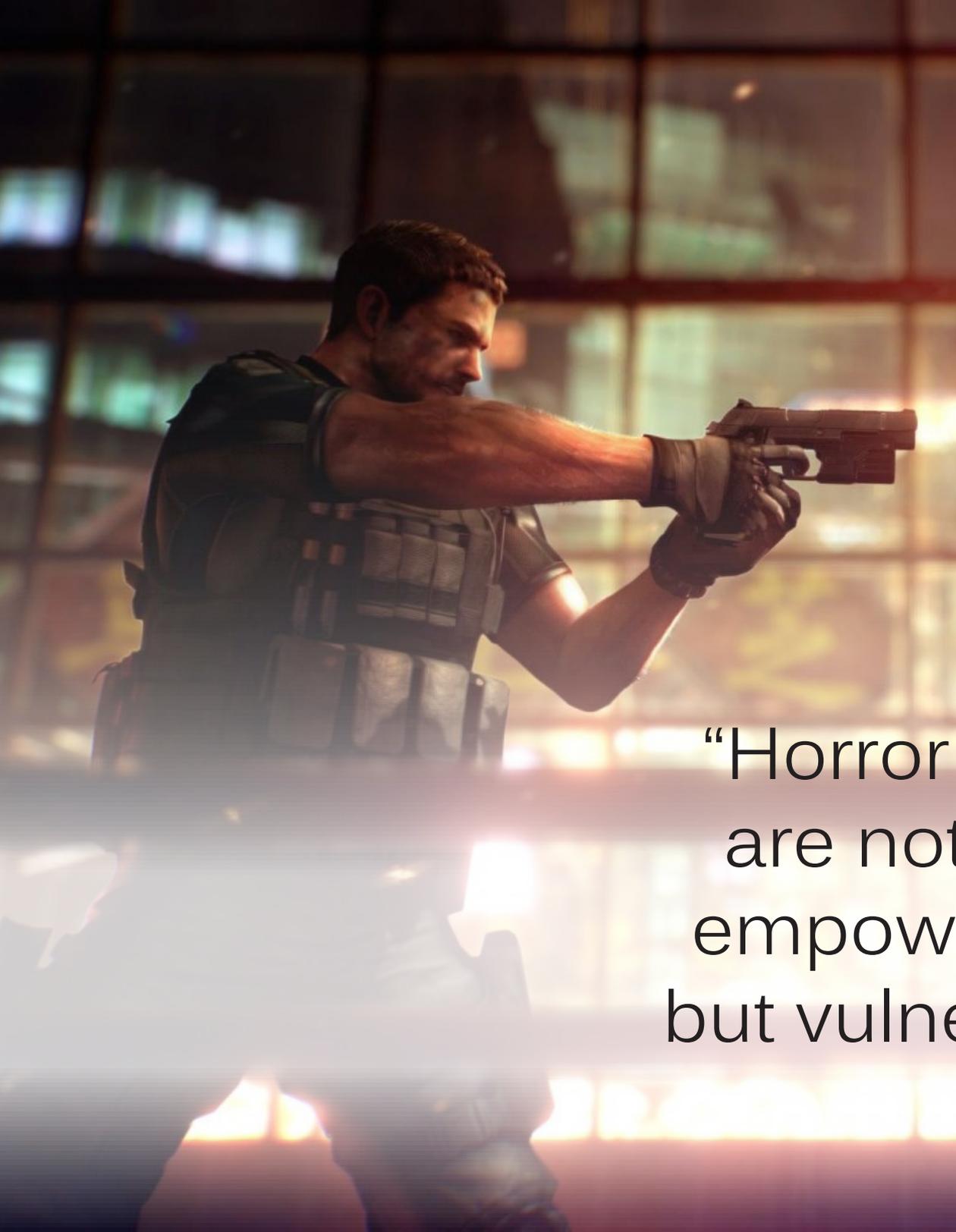
Horror games, by contrast, are not about empowerment, but vulnerability. Developers have come to understand that giving their players too much power in survival horror contexts is immersion-breaking, spoiling the tension created by feelings of relative weakness. The terror we felt running through the forests of *Resident Evil 4* does not transfer to murdering the zombified form of the most powerful individual in the free world in *Resident Evil 6*.

Despite this, there is room for multiple approaches to violence within the horror genre. All horror games place you in a world where the normal order of things has been disrupted and distorted by an outside force, but some give you limited means to fight back. In these cases, violence becomes your tool for restoring the world, every beast slain bringing you closer to returning to normalcy. The important difference to action games, and where

the genre line is frequently blurred, is in the player's conception as the weaker party, persistently on the edge of being overwhelmed by the terrors around them.

However, other developers see placing the burden of restoration on the player as diminishing the horror. Certain games aren't meant to be beaten, just survived, an attitude to violence best embodied by a selection of cult horror games such as *Fatal Frame* and indie darlings such as *Penumbra* and *Amnesia*. The idea that we must resort to violence to progress is discarded in favor of a combination of puzzle solving and running away from existential threats. Though not entirely non-violent, games like *DayZ* and *Don't Starve* go in a similar direction by making death a looming inevitability.

By contrast, the heavy reliance on action elements in the likes of *Resident Evil 6* represents a dilution of their lifeblood and initial genre. The employment of violence is the difference between two different genres and two different markets here, and it seems questionable whether an amalgamation of both in gloomy action romps will gain traction. Gamers enjoy creativity and originality, but there's only a finite amount of tinkering one can do before you lose the genre, and thus the market.



“Horror
are not
empow
but vulne

A man with long hair, wearing a dark jacket, is shown in profile, holding a handgun with both hands. He is standing in a city at night, with bright, colorful neon signs and lights in the background, creating a hazy, atmospheric scene. The lighting is warm and glowing, primarily from the neon signs.

games
t about
erment,
erability.”

Off the Grid: *Stardrive*

By Zachary Bricton

After a satisfying smack of sound and a blip of light, scouts fling outwards to uncharted star systems and freighters move goods and people to new colonies. *Stardrive*, though not quite turnbased, is a galactic strategy game that still holds itself to 4X standards, if a bit liberally. Once a planetary network is established by your ships, micromanagement concerns like economy are mostly automated, leaving you to adjust the tax rates and individual production sliders of each planet.

Although streamlined, *Stardrive* is unhelpful in getting new players on their feet, refusing to hint at any kind of strategy or even basic functionalities. Answers to fundamental questions, like how to establish trade routes for your ships, have to be dug up on message boards, Zero Sum Games still failing,

as they have since beta, to add essential tooltips that would be expected in any kind of software, videogame or otherwise. A barren interface can bring an exciting game to a standstill when it turns into a frantic search for clues on how to perform simple actions.

Stardrive's more militaristic focus features a drag-and-drop ship design screen, which comes with a more rewarding learning experience. Trial and error yields all sorts of entertaining results here: It could be in your uncontrolled excitement to test out newly researched shields that you forgo valuable battery power, later finding your corsairs stranded in space after hyperdrive. Or failing to make room for ordinance on your machine gun laden prototypes, who, very early into battle, will be rendered sitting ducks without

ammunition.

Valuable experience will come from watching your brilliant engineering go up in smoke, witnessing some awfully interesting fireworks in the process. Armada sizes can get quite large, each ship and its fired projectiles scrambling on their own trajectories. Flurries of rockets and lasers damage specific spots on every vessel, another element to think about when building ships, as an unprotected cockpit can lead to untimely defeat.

Yet, *Stardrive* does little to encourage creativity. It touts huge research trees and dozens of ship parts, but the expansiveness is misleading, completely unbalanced and full of exploits to discover. Outfitting ships with cheap missile technology will pretty much demolish all levels of AI, who even at

the highest difficulty refuse to build fleets as passionately as a human player. Talk of adding online play isn't very inspiring when you can launch a fleet of ground troops a minute into the game, land on your opponent's capital and assume control of it instantly, effectively ending the match.

Diplomacy is perhaps the biggest afterthought, the AI's demands often nonsensical and never progressing in directions other than war. Voluntarily handicapping your civilization's racial traits during the match set up and hoping for a poor starting position is the best bet for an interesting campaign, but it can only do so much. Each game gets to a point where you're certain to win, it's just a matter of prolonging victory for your own amusement, of which there's little to be had.

HW

Same Difference: Console Wars

The case of two remarkably similar boxes.

First of all, I've gotta say RESPECT to the Reddit crew who loved my work last time. You guys rock! You know the FACTS!

And just for you guys, who are BEHIND me, here's a special on generation eight of the Console War.

The Xbox is Microsoft doing what they do best. Building kick ass consoles that kick ass. While kicking ass. Damn, I got my X to the Z on today.

The PS4 is Sony trying to reprise the success they got on the PS1 by actually getting some games for it instead. That supposedly bounces towards you like a Weeping Angel.

And then there's that Nintendo SNES U thing, but we're not meant to be looking at baby toys.

Does this mean they're not the same console? No. What proves things

is FACTS.

You're looking at an awful lot of dollar.

Xbone: \$499 and that's a FACT. That's quality you're paying for with quantity.

PS4: The mere FACT someone hasn't brought out an edgy name should tell you enough. The embarrassingly low number of \$399 shows it's only 4/5ths of the priciness of the Xbox.

Wii U: It comes in at a laughable \$250. I've played one and it was rubbish. Let's just chuck this out now.

Both consoles ignore their parents.

You might think this sounds really cool, but it really isn't. No backwards



“That means if I want to have a Call of Duty marathon, which is like every day, I have to plug in my Xbox and my Xbox 360 and now my Xbone, while two different Kinects are looking at me. Creepy, man.”

“The PS4 is Sony trying to reprise the success they got on the PS1 by actually getting some games for it instead.”



compatibility means no playing older games. That means if I want to have a *Call of Duty* marathon, which is like every day, I have to plug in my Xbox and my Xbox 360 and now my Xbone, while two different Kinects are looking at me. Creepy, man.

Equally, if I want to run a Royal Rumble of wrestling titles on my Playstations, I've got to have 4 going. That may not sound much to you, but have you ever tried plugging in spaghetti? I'm almost having a *Lady and the Tramp* moment here. Without the kissing. Or the dogs. Though when I get my own place, there'll be dogs as well.

Numbers. They're like the FACTS of Math.

Fourteen is the magic number for the Xbone. Coming out 2014, or near enough, it has 14 different ways of pressing on the controller and the fourteenth letter of the alphabet is N. What letter does the Xbone have that the other two haven't? Yeah, you guessed it.

And the games: 19 launch titles, two of them as fourteenth sequels (*FIFA 14* and *NBA Live 14*) and three being exclusives: 19 minus two minus three is... 14.

PS4 though looks like an eight. Eighth generation with eight gig and

eight x86-64 cores, started in 2008.

14 is bigger than eight. That's a MATH FACT.

They're both black boxes.

What did Alienware, Nintendo and the PS1 teach you? Individualized cases are cool. Like skateboards. If I want to take my board to my friends house, I want it to look pimped. Not like some PC modder has stuck his Raspberry Pi in a shoe box.

Gotta mark you both down for not listening to the fans here guys. And I don't mean the ones that catch all the dirt. If my iPhone has a case that says "I'm better than Blackberry," I want my console to say "I own" too.

Games Galore.

Xbone: *Call of Duty: Ghosts*. You can have a dog. Is there anything more brilliant than that? I'm going for a bull mastiff called Tyson.

Watchdogs as well. Can't wait to have another dog game - not heard what dogs you can have in this though.

Wolfenstein: The New Order: Killing Nazis - 'nuff said.

PS4: *Warframe*. Robot ninjas - again.

DC Universe. Batman owns - but you don't get to play Batman, which sucks.

The Last of Us. Last of them more like.

**A controller by any other name would
frag just as sweet.**

Each has its own set of gizmos, but are they just the same thing with different names?

Playstation Eye or Kinect 2: Which is better? There's no FACTS there.

Xbox Live versus PSN: Live is too expensive, PSN is unreliable.

This is almost sounding like a FACT-BLAST! Let's get to it!

**BLU-RAY, 4K SUPPORT, HARD-
DRIVE, CONTROLLERS,
BLUETOOTH...Oh man,
Microsoft is the first to lose out, no
Bluetooth.**

But who the hell uses Bluetooth apart from phreakers? PS4 probably still does QRs.

Tell, Don't Show.

That's another journalism quote – it means that what you say is more important than what you can put on screen. PS4 may have hundreds of games where things turn into Skittles and fly about the place, but the Xbone has sexy pictures of Cortana in *Halo 5*. I know what I'd rather look at.

And with the awesome stuff you've seen at E3, you know the Xbone trashes the PS4, and tells it that it'll all be over soon. Kiefer Sunderland is the new Snake? He ROCKED in *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*.

By now you're thinking, "Hey, I know sKanDle, he's telling me to buy the Xbone."

WRONG! WRONGITY
WRONG! THAT'S NOT A FACT!

**THE XBONE, THE PS4 AND
THE WII-U ARE THE SAME
CONSOLE.**

You know what a generation is, don't you? All the guys you went to school with are your generation. They're all the same, aren't they? The clue is in the question, my friends. All the Generation Eight consoles are expensive, eight core CPU, eight gigabyte memory boxes with Blu-Ray and Motion Sensors that are always online. And that's a FACT.

You may want to argue this, but you know in your heart that you're wrong and I'm right.

Any geek on the internet starts giving you trouble talking to you about games or consoles?

You come back to me and I'll make sure they know the FACTS.

I'm outta here. Peace.

HW

*“And then there’s that
Nintendo SNES U
thing, but we’re not
meant to be looking
at baby toys.”*



A man wearing a dark hat and a light-colored shirt is shown in profile, holding a handgun. The scene is dramatically lit from the side, creating strong highlights and deep shadows. The background is a warm, textured wall, possibly wood paneling. The overall mood is gritty and cinematic.

The Other Screen: The Good, the Bad and the Bloodthirsty

Andrew Huntly recalls another medium struggling with the portrayal of violence.

Cinema's history is odd when it comes to commercialism and violence. It wasn't until 1967's *Bonnie and Clyde* used squibs to produce vivid blood spurts that more explicit violence crept into mainstream cinema. While drive-in schlock and taboo-breaking European films had shown gore and depravity,

mainstream American cinemas had yet to project much bloodshed.

This context of relative purity helps explain the disparaging comments Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* received around its release - The New York Times called it "repellent". To modern eyes the film seems almost

bloodless. It features plenty of gun fights, but the bullets never penetrate or cause any blood spray. A brief scene in which a lead character is viciously beaten almost carries an air of slapstick for the lack of lasting marks. In the 21st century, the idea of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* being shocking, nevermind repellent, is close to laughable.

Especially when cinema has just given us a directly comparable example in Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*. A more straight-faced affair than his usual style of self-aware reference, *Django* still pays homage to the spaghetti western films of the 60s and 70s. Tarantino himself declared *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* 'the best directed film ever', so it seems fair to consider it an influence.

And while *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* was a fairly bloodless affair, *Django* is soaked in it. Its protracted climax easily makes it the most violent Western ever made, possibly one of the most violent big budget films too. Yet it received little criticism over this. Professional critics completely glossed over it, considering it both part of Tarantino's style and an ode to the ultraviolent Westerns made in Italy. Audiences seemed neither shocked nor repelled, rewarding the film with a healthy \$423 million at the box office.

Why is *Django* considered a fine piece of blockbuster entertainment

while the comparatively chaste *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* suffered a critical lashing? Part of the initial, hostile reaction was over it being a Spaghetti Western, a genre that was generally marked down regardless of actual quality. The level of violence would likely have received negative attention either way, but placing it in a commonly reviled genre only exacerbated the problem.

The lashing of Spaghetti Westerns, in turn, had to do with film criticism's excessive notions of maturity. The 50s and 60s saw the reign of Goddard and Hitchcock, and auteur voices were considered far more expressive and important than big, brash crowd pleasers. Critics favored elaborate explorations of the human condition, films dabbling in violence and sex were seen as inferior and lacking directorial vision, they were kept to smaller theaters and mass-attended drive-in screenings.

It all changed in the 1970s when quality blockbuster entertainment became so prominent it was impossible to ignore. The one-two punch of *Jaws* and *Star Wars* (films rooted in the old taboo of 'genre') cried for a new yardstick, one on which blockbusters could be graded on the same scale as the smaller, artistic films. This critical re-evaluation ran parallel to a change in perception. Theaters were seen as family establishments in the 60s, while young

adults and older teenagers kept to sleazy drive-ins. Now they had grown up into a new generation of movie fans and critics.

Tarantino's fascination with grindhouse plays well to an audience that indulged such fare in their childhood. But unlike *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, these films were already cast off as wretched and despicable, banned from classier establishments. Sergio Leone's Western was a shock to the cultural system only because it was allowed into it in the first place.

It's also important to underline the difference between disturbing and cathartic violence. *Django* actually plays with both - a fight between two black slaves halfway through the film is tough,

Gore and blood are really only the byproduct of violence, the important thing being its framing.

messy and uncomfortable, while the final shootout is exciting and fun. Gore and blood are really only the byproduct of violence, the important thing being its framing. Peter Jackson's *Braindead* and Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* are two of the most gruesome films ever made,

but their slapstick tone and wry wit make them light films rather than a heavy ones. The idea of a 'fun' violent film would have been unheard of in the 60s, an era still accustomed to silly, bruiseless slapstick.

The introduction of more explicit and more shocking violence over time allowed talented filmmakers to meld the innocuous with gore to produce enjoyable results.

The reaction and lack of reaction to violence in *The Good, the Bad and*

the Ugly and *Django Unchained* is part of a larger cultural growth in films and their audience. Genre films have always dabbled in the explicit, all it really took was one film every now and again to push back the borders for the mainstream. And it's a frequent push: From *Blood Feast*, to *Night of the Living Dead*, to *Last House on the Left* and recent examples like *A Serbian Film* and *The Human Centipede*. Does this mean we'll eventually see films with even more explicit violence make \$400 million? I doubt it.

Everyone's seen *The Human Centipede* trailer on YouTube, but far fewer cared enough to watch the full product. It's a byproduct of a more connected society

that streamable trailers have replaced word of mouth, making the depraved and disgusting accessible enough that audiences don't need to seek out its full realization. Eventually, the excess you pile on a film reel produces nothing but diminishing returns. Instead, it's important to fuse it to a story, place violence in context and make it palpable to the audience, ensuring it's appropriate and resonates on the frequency the filmmaker desires. Most audiences don't appreciate being

Critics favored elaborate explorations of the human condition, films dabbling in violence and sex were seen as inferior and lacking directorial vision.

disturbed or revolted; they want to be engaged and excited, and these things are neither harmed nor encouraged by splashing around blood. What's important is what the red stuff means.

HW

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➤ Mike Grace from Great Britain is an aficionado of fine writing, fine games and “Fine, I’ll do it tomorrow.”

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➤ *Haywire Magazine* is an amateur games journalism project developed by Johannes Köller and Andrew Walt. All written content has been contributed generously by and is entirely property of their author's byline. All visual content has been retrieved through Google image search and is property of their respective owners.

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