

Game creators seek mature storytelling in games

September 6 2014, by Derrik J. Lang



This photo provided by Camouflaj shows a scene from the video game, "Republique." Within the conference rooms and across the show floor at last weekend's Penny Arcade Expo in Seattle, the annual celebration of gaming felt completely opposite to what was happening at the same time online. For the past month, a debate involving several facets of the gaming community has waged between fans, developers and journalists who cover the gaming industry. (AP Photo/Camouflaj)

For many of the game designers showing off their latest creations at the recent Penny Arcade video game expo in Seattle, the push to feature more mature storytelling has been one of their most significant

challenges.

"We are changing as a medium," said Richard Dansky, a writer who has worked on several "Tom Clancy" games, in a talk called "You're So Mature! Is Storytelling in Games Coming of Age?"

While recognizing there have been serious-minded games going back to the days of 1980s text-based adventures, Dansky said an unstoppable evolution is afoot in the industry—an evolution that has sparked recent online feuding between fans, bloggers and developers.

"We are throwing open new doors and exploring new territory in ways that are advancing faster and obviously making some people unhappy," he said. "We can't just say, 'They have to deal with it.' They're letting us know they're unhappy in ways that are reprehensible. It's up to us to keep reinforcing and pushing for change."

Over the past 50 years, the interactive medium once considered merely child's play has gained both financial and cultural significance, but a disparity persists, as evidenced on the floor of the Seattle expo, known as PAX Prime. There, the likes of the kid-friendly, cartoony "Pokemon" icon Pikachu loomed over gamers firing virtual guns and slashing virtual throats in "Far Cry 4" and "Assassin's Creed."



In this Friday, Aug. 29, 2014 file photo, video gamers play Magic 2015 - Duels of the Planeswalkers from Wizards of the Coast on both sides of a partition, in a booth at the Penny Arcade Expo, a fan-centric celebration of gaming in Seattle. Within the conference rooms and across the show floor at last weekend's Penny Arcade Expo in Seattle, the annual celebration of gaming felt completely opposite to what was happening at the same time online. For the past month, a debate involving several facets of the gaming community has waged between fans, developers and journalists who cover the gaming industry. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, file)

"I think it's important not to lose track that games tackling serious subjects have been woven into the DNA of the industry since the beginning," said Dansky. "We've always had people who've attempted to use this medium for more than just 'shoot 'em in the face.' I think what's happening now is unprecedented access to consumers and the awareness the Internet allows us."

Ryan Payton, the head of [game](#) studio Camouflaj who previously worked on the "Metal Gear Solid" and "Halo" series, said he had to balance the financial rigors of game development with his personal desire to explore a mature topic while crafting the mobile game "Republique," which casts players as a hacker guiding a woman through a dystopia where individuality is banned.

"My end goal is to not only make enough money to keep the business going and our 25 employees well fed," said Payton. "It's also that I know, through our game, we could touch millions—if not possibly tens of millions—of people in all parts of the world and get them to think seriously about surveillance infrastructures, whether they're corporate or governmental."

While indie games have long been the biggest sector of the industry to tackle sociopolitical topics like diversity, personal freedom, mental health and sexual identity, developers at PAX Prime said that line of thinking has come to many mainstream games in recent years, pointing to "The Last of Us" and "The Walking Dead: The Game" as examples of titles that took such risks.



In this Friday, Aug. 29, 2014 file photo, fan gets an autograph from Jason "MANvsGAME" Love, right, as Love sits with Justin "TheJustinFlynn" Flynn, second from right, at the booth for the online video game community "Twitch," at the Penny Arcade Expo, a fan-centric celebration of gaming in Seattle. Both men host programs and gaming seminars on the online network. Within the conference rooms and across the show floor at last weekend's Penny Arcade Expo in Seattle, the annual celebration of gaming felt completely opposite to what was happening at the same time online. For the past month, a debate involving several facets of the gaming community has waged between fans, developers and journalists who cover the gaming industry. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, file)

Toiya Kristen Finley, a writer who recently worked on a mobile game called "Fat Chicken," which light-heartedly looks at the issue of factory farming, said the most difficult topic for [game designers](#) to confront has been sexual abuse. She chastised the PlayStation 3 game "Beyond: Two Souls" for limiting interactivity during a scene that dealt with a sexual assault at a bar.

"I'm not saying you can't have that content, but I think it's a problem when it's shortcut character development," said Finely. "It's often used to toughen a character up, but it just doesn't work that way. When you experience trauma, it can take years of healing. It's a long process. It's disrespecting to the character and players who've been through that, as well."

Ultimately, designers like Qais Fulton, who has worked on such games as "Crimson Dragon" and "Marlow Briggs and the Mask of Death," believes there's room in the cloud and on hard drives for all types of titles. Fulton is among the game developers who hope to bridge the divide between not-so-serious and more thoughtful games.

"I think the resistance to mature storytelling in games is coming from a place of concern," said Fulton. "It doesn't mean mature games preclude juvenile games. Fart jokes are never going away. We will always love them, so just because we enjoy those doesn't mean we can't also appreciate a heartfelt, insightful and poignant experience that has no fart jokes."

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