

Chapter 8

Sideways into Truth: Kierkegaard, Philistines, and Why We Love Sex and Violence

Erin Hoffman
Philomath Games, USA

ABSTRACT

We often discuss the interactive medium as being possibly the ultimate in “meta” studies, touching virtually every discipline, and yet we rarely discuss it in serious terms of that other most comprehensive of humanities: philosophy. Correspondingly, philosophy and the traditional humanities have historically distanced themselves from games, relegating them to some curious and inconsequential sub-study of cultural anthropology if they are studied at all. Yet it is the very human foundational compulsion to contemplate death—as will be shown through the works of philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Ernest Becker—that drives much of the violent content that makes the video game medium a lightning rod for cultural scrutiny and controversy. The chapter explores two video games—the controversial Super Columbine Massacre RPG!—through the lens of existential death-anxiety to show how video games represent contemplation of fundamental ethical concerns in the human experience.

INTRODUCTION

If we are going to properly talk about ethics, philosophy, and games, we should begin with death, the driver of the fundamental question of human existence, and the impetus for our definition as living beings. Without death—and with it, suffering—our questions about individual ethical relationships

between human beings lack gravity. Without death, the central ethical question posed by Aristotle—how should we live?—becomes a trivial curiosity, an experiment lacking the time pressure that defines our existence as mortal beings.

Modern philosophy primarily concerns itself with what is called “analytic” philosophy, questions pertaining to the physical nature of reality and the nature of human consciousness. But when

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-845-6.ch008

we consider the relevance of philosophy as one of the humanities, and the role of philosophy in popular media, we're really talking about what games say about the experience of being human in our present time. This chapter seeks to show how death perpetually lurks in our subconscious, and how our treatment of death in video games and popular media is fundamentally rooted in this concept, both clarified and illustrated by great thinkers of our past, namely Søren Kierkegaard, famed first existentialist—who may have managed, hundreds of years before their advent, to profoundly underestimate video games.

Because this chapter attempts to subvert the traditional limitations of linear media, you should also feel encouraged to jump between headers.

What We're Doing When We Play

To begin thinking about what differentiates the mechanic of death in an interactive medium from its presence in linear passive media, we must begin with a definition and an understanding of the basic psychological phenomenon at work in interactivity.

The most concise description of the basic psychological exchange present in interactivity is provided by James Paul Gee in his work on games and literacy (“literacy” in the sense of symbolic representational thought, not just verbal language). Because Steven Johnson does an even better job of paraphrasing Gee, I'll borrow his language:

The game scholar James Gee breaks probing down into a four-part process, which he calls the “probe, hypothesize, reprobe, rethink” cycle (Johnson, 2005):

1. The player must probe the virtual world (which involves looking around the current environment, clicking on something, or engaging in a certain action).
2. Based on reflection while probing and afterward, the player must form a hypothesis about what something (a text, object, artifact, event, or action) might mean in a usefully situated way.
3. The player reprobes the world with that hypothesis in mind, seeing what effect he or she gets.
4. The player treats this effect as feedback from the world and accepts or rethinks his or her original hypothesis.

Put another way: when gamers interact with these environments, they are learning the basic procedure of the scientific method. (Johnson, 2005, p. 45)

This process of interacting experimentally with a virtual environment, which characterizes the differentiating activity that defines a digital game, is not just the basic procedure of the scientific method, but is the basic procedure for human organized thought, for core cognition, learning, and the fundamental roots of curiosity, innovation, and—for our species, at least—survival.

This hypothesize-and-test cycle is the core of the play interaction; a series of play interactions linked together under a greater creative thesis constitutes a “game.” In the classic board game *Monopoly*, players test strategies for achieving the greatest amount of in-game wealth (game tokens, or “Monopoly money”) within the rules for obtaining it—money-token exchange for property-token items is the basic play interaction. The collection of total play interactions constrained by a rule set is the game—in this case *Monopoly*, invented by Elizabeth Magie (as “The Landlord Game”) in 1903 to illustrate a ludological—that is, game-delivered—thesis on the consequences of land monopolism (Magie, 1903).

Now that we have considered a specific definition of the play interaction, we can examine the appearance of death in the video game medium.

14 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/sideways-into-truth/41315

Related Content

Learning While Playing: Design Implications for Edutainment Games

Kalle Jegersand Carlotte Wiberg (2009). *Handbook of Research on Effective Electronic Gaming in Education* (pp. 1449-1459).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/learning-while-playing/20159

Enhancing Student Affect From Multi-Classroom Simulation Games via Teacher Professional Development: Supporting Game Implementation With the ROPD Model

Jeremy Rieland Kimberly A. Lawless (2021). *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations* (pp. 34-54).

www.irma-international.org/article/enhancing-student-affect-from-multi-classroom-simulation-games-via-teacher-professional-development/278781

Mobile Gaming: Exploring Spaces and Places

Blaine Hoffman (2011). *Business, Technological, and Social Dimensions of Computer Games: Multidisciplinary Developments* (pp. 185-199).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/mobile-gaming-exploring-spaces-places/53929

Designing Socially Expressive Character Agents to Facilitate Learning

Steve DiPaola (2010). *Educational Gameplay and Simulation Environments: Case Studies and Lessons Learned* (pp. 213-230).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/designing-socially-expressive-character-agents/40884

Strategies to Teach Game Development Across Age Groups

Lakshmi Prayaga, James W. Coffey and Karen Rasmussen (2011). *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations* (pp. 28-43).

www.irma-international.org/article/strategies-teach-game-development-across/54349