

## Chapter 9

# What Videogames have to Teach us about Screenworld and the Humanistic Ethos

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### ABSTRACT

*Recent societal critiques charge that the pervasiveness and ubiquity of screen-based technologies place the emotional, social, and cognitive development of their users at stake. Many of these critiques suffer, however, from a sensational and moralistic formulation. To move forward ethical investigation into sophisticated inquiry this essay closely examines one screenworld technology, videogames, with an aim of (a) categorizing videogames' active and performative features and (b) assessing how these features present themselves during gameplay as compatible, incompatible, and antithetical to our humanistic needs. These needs form a value system termed the Humanistic Ethos which is further articulated into measurable characteristics along four dimensions—the Poetic Imagination, Dialogic Relations, Systemic Thinking, and Existential Vigor. A survey of videogames along with two case studies develop these dimensions within their technical, social, and personal contexts revealing the delicate interplay between designer, game and player. Design principles compatible with the Humanistic Ethos are discussed. Limitations and future directions are also considered.*

### WHAT DOES A VIDEOGAME WANT?

Imagine if a videogame were a human being. Imagine if it had its own rights, its own desires, and its own human needs. When humanizing a videogame in this respect, we would not ask whether the videogame is a good or bad thing, but rather we would

ask gentle questions that unveil the videogame's nature and its characteristic possibilities. To reach a robust understanding we would have to first tease apart the videogame from the commercial ethos and the hedonistic impulse that has generally driven its production and uptake over the past three decades. Then we would have to look beyond the prophetic reports of the videogame's fanatics and detractors alike. Last, we would have to summon up the cour-

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age to approach the videogame on its own terms and address it at its own leisure asking, “What do you want?” (this approach is inspired by Turkle, 2009). If we pay close enough attention and patiently attune ourselves to the videogame’s needs we may be graced with an answer, “I want to be imaginative: please give me symbols, rhetoric, and phantasy.” This is the videogame’s poetic human need. If we listen further yet, the videogame may also reveal, “I would like very much to be sociable: please give me playful characters, progressing stories, social interactions and cultural significance.” This is its dialogic human need. If we linger longer still, “I would like to be understood” we hear it say, “please give me rules that are consistent, persistent, and interactive, yet also discernable to others.” This is the videogame’s systemic human need, to be a dynamic system that is comprehensive in scope yet comprehensible in nature. Finally, the videogame might speak to its existential need for designers and players “who have the patience to legitimately meet and draw meaning out of the game’s challenges as well as the gratitude to appreciate its rewards.” If we ourselves are imaginative, sociable, understanding, and gracious we may be able to answer to the videogame’s humanistic needs.

The history of videogames, however, is all too often a history of its humanistic needs not being met, or rather, of being jeopardized by a constellation of commercial needs, social behaviors, and personal impulses and drives (Herz, 1997). Worse still, rather than tracing the effects of videogames through the interplay of commercial, social and personal dynamics, critics have largely been content to project their fears and disgust onto videogames directly. As such videogames are discredited as crude, anti-social, mindless, and indulgent. They are argued to bring out the worst in us—violence, narcissism, restlessness and addiction (Anderson, C.A., & Bushman, B.J., 2001; Funk, Hagan, Schimming, Bullock, Buchman & Myers, 2002; Furedi & Lewis, in press; Mercogliano, 2007). The earlier attacks

and critiques of videogames were frequently catalyzed by sensationally-publicized incidents involving acts of violence or negligence whereby the perpetrator held an affinity for videogames (Kutner & Olson, 2008). At that time fewer people played games and gameplay was stereotyped as an anti-social activity (Kutner & Olson, 2008). Now that videogame playing is pervasive, the critiques have shifted to speculation of the harmful effects of ‘media saturation’ on children lumping videogame playing with television viewing and online socializing (Guldberg, 2009). Yet, researchers drawing from their own work find these accusations to be overhyped, misinformed, and not empirically grounded (Buckingham, 2005; Kutner & Olson, 2008; Livingstone & Bovill, 1999; Marsh, Brooks, Hughes, Ritchie, Roberts, & Wright, 2005). How then are we to make sense of the “epidemic of confusion” as Peter Marsh (2005) puts it regarding the litany of voices, speculation, and misinformation that surrounds our interactions with screen-based technologies?

First, we must take these concerns seriously and recognize that they fit into a wider societal discussion about the precarious effects of living and interacting within a world that is increasingly computerized and virtual: screenworld (Borgmann, 1992; Greenfield, 2008; Jackson, 2008; Lightman, 2005; Siegel 2008; Turkle, 2009; Ventura, 2009). Screenworld refers to the character of our interactive technologies and immersive online worlds as distinguished from the structure and nature of the real world. Screen-based environments, for example, are home to different kinds of symbols and ambiances than physical landscapes. Online interaction is different than face-to-face contact. Likewise, decision-making holds different implications and consequences in the systems of virtual worlds than in the real. Further still, virtual reality is not marked by the same boundaries and burdens as tangible reality, nor by the same circumstances and contingencies. (Borgmann, 1999; Ventura, 2009).

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