Games and Gamification

CS109: Ethical Foundations of Computer Science
April 24, 2018
Let’s talk about ethics in game journalism!

• There is actually an issue with ethics in game journalism!
  • Reviews by journalists and play throughs by streamers are bought by major publishers to promote their games
  • Little transparency in exchange of gifts or monetary compensation for these promotions
  • …

• But GamerGate has about 0% to do with ethics in game journalism and if anything, it shut down any meaningful conversation there could have been
  • Why?
Rise of GamerGate

• In 2014, game developer, Zoe Quinn, was accused by her ex-boyfriend of cheating on him with five men, several of whom were game journalists
• Quinn was accused by gamers of having slept with game journalists to get positive publicity for her recent text-based game, Depression Quest
• #GamerGate represented in-crowd’s desire to expose corruption of the game industry
• Quinn’s address and phone number doxxed (revealed publicly)
  • Coordinated death and rape threats forced Quinn to flee her home
So what about ethics in game journalism?

- Kotaku writer, Nathan Grayson, was dating Quinn but he never reviewed Depression Quest
  - Mentioned it once in a half-sentence before his relationship with Quinn started
  - Quinn’s ex-boyfriend later rescinded his accusatory blog posts
- Attacks on Quinn expanded to attacks on/doxxing other women:
  - Feminist critic, Anita Sarkeesian, who created a Youtube series applying feminist critique to games
  - Popular actress and gamer, Felicia Day
  - Game developer, Brianna Wu
- Gamergate mobs petitioned companies such as Intel to pull ads from sites critiquing their movement
Why did GamerGate happen?

• My personal opinion:
  • Gaming culture has always had issues with promoting insensitivity, exclusivity, and provocativity in its inter-personal interactions
  • As gaming becomes more mainstream, fringe groups and subcultures have lost their perceived home/safe space
  • As gaming becomes more mainstream, fringe groups and subcultures experience the sense of power from being a “target demographic”
  • Result is “gamers” who take out aggression/frustration on “safe” target (i.e. marginalized people) rather than addressing internal unhappiness or conflicts arising from growing numbers of “bros and jocks” in gaming circles
  • Toxic masculine culture has made it difficult for young men to understand and express the complexity of their feelings in a meaningful, productive way
Gamification and Gambling Mechanics

• Gamification is the process of introducing “game mechanics” into everyday applications to increase user retention and involvement
  • Usually centered around badges, achievements, leaderboards etc
  • Distills games down to “rewards for user effort”

• Gambling mechanics allow player to vie for a great reward by placing a relatively small bet
  • Elements of chance and high payoff
  • Success results in a large dopamine reward that can become addictive (similar to drug use)

• Free-to-play games often centered around both gamification (investment of time rather than skill) and/or gambling (high levels of RNG)
What are Whales?

• Whales are small percentage of player population that make up majority of free-to-play game revenue in spending
  • Usually have some form of gambling addiction
  • Can lose their money and their relationships to predatory game design decisions
Why Exploit Whales?

• Free to play games need to make money somehow
  • Games are expensive and risky to create
• Many players are unwilling to spend money on game – hence the rise of “free-to-play” mechanics
• Free-to-play mechanics coming full circle and being reintroduced into more traditional games
Case Study: Rise of the Alt-Right

Case Study: Battlefront II Backlash

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