

Are video games conservative?

Ben Hourigan

Through July and early August 2005, controversy has dominated the world of videogame journalism. In the United States, discovery of a hidden sex scene in this year's *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* brought Senator Hillary Clinton, among others, to reiterate the old idea that videogames were exposing children to sexual and violent content that would harm them in some way.

Journalists have been raising concerns about videogame content since 1976, when the arcade game *Death Race* let players drive a car over running humanoid zombies, and lawmakers have seldom passed up an opportunity to jump on the bandwagon. Concern about videogames' alleged potential to corrupt youth reached a peak in 1999, when journalists reported on a home video in which Eric Harris talked with his friend Dylan Klebold about how the massacre they later committed at Columbine High School in Colorado would be like the videogame *Doom*. Since then, negative coverage of videogame violence has been steady, and governments' usual reaction to specific controversies is censorship. Once news of *San Andreas*' hidden sex scene broke, Australia's Office of Film and Literature Classification quickly revoked the game's classification, effectively banning it from sale.

When I tell people about my doctoral research, they often ask if I'm trying to prove that videogames really *do* turn players into killers before

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I manage to explain that I investigate videogames' political aspects. Parents usually inquire if playing videogames will harm their child or teenager. For the generation of parents, journalists and legislators that grew up before videogames became a part of popular culture, the new medium seems to be the bearer of a strange newness that threatens to corrupt youth and destroy the foundations of society. But really, videogames are packed with themes which suggest to players that it is good to be a guardian of one's societies' traditions and institutions. These themes, in turn, are part of aesthetic traditions that videogame developers constantly turn to as a basis for new creations. The medium is, in fact, dominated by conservative sentiment.

Roger Scruton captured the essence of conservatism when he wrote, in *The Meaning of Conservatism*, that it 'involves an attempt to perpetuate a social organism, through times of unprecedented change'. English parliamentarian and intellectual Edmund Burke crystallized this conservative attitude in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which championed British constitutional monarchy against the threat posed by an enthusiasm for radical change sparked by the French Revolution of 1789. Just as Burke sought to preserve his society, in videogames the protago-

nists very often defend living people and existing institutions from traitors, usurpers or invaders who threaten the most radical change a society could ever face: its own destruction.

We see the conservative impulse to preserve even in such early games as 1978's *Space Invaders*, where the player controls a mobile gun turret as it mounts a defence against an infinite onslaught of alien attackers. The defence motif, on which videogames' conservatism is built, persists in videogames right up to the present. Even *Doom*, the game talked about by the Columbine killers, has its hero defending a human outpost on Mars from demons teleporting in from Hell: the massacre certainly was not a replay of the game's heroic premise.

The games that most arouse the ire of politicians, judges, journalists and parents in Australia and overseas



Dragon Quest (2005)
Image courtesy Square Enix

are, in fact, uncommonly rebellious and transgressive. Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* series, which began in 1997 and to which the controversial *San Andreas* belongs, has players guiding the games' protagonists as they rob, assault, murder, car-jack, and trade in illegal drugs. Yet such games, which put the player in the villain's shoes for the sake of novelty, are atypical of videogames in general, and they revel in rebellion not out of any political radicalism or desire to corrupt, but rather because playing the bad guy is a novel and welcome change for players more frequently involved in world-saving heroics.

In my research, I focus on role-playing games (RPGs), a genre where the defence motif is almost universally present. According to the Entertainment Software Association, RPGs were the fourth-largest selling videogame genre in the United States in 2004, accounting for ten per cent of all games sold. RPG players have to guide characters on quests to save imaginary worlds from destruction or conquest. As they explore the world of the game, advancing toward the final battle with their enemy which will decide the course of history, RPG players tend their characters as they grow in strength by gaining experience in battle with monsters that roam the land. By fighting, finding treasure, learning new skills, and equipping themselves with better weapons and armour, RPG heroes come to attain supernatural power that gives them a chance at winning against seemingly unstoppable foes. This element of careful shepherding is just one example of the tendency of RPGs to encourage the nurture of what already exists.

RPGs' stories, visual aesthetics, and gameplay are conservative even by videogame standards. Like many videogame genres, RPGs' history extends back to the medium's infancy. The first commercial RPG, *Ultima*, released in 1981, already drew on a long heritage of conventions from outside videogaming. Its programmer, Richard Gar-

riott, was a Texan teenager who had worked towards his first commercial product by writing games that adapted the rules and settings of *Dungeons & Dragons*. This earlier, non-computerised role-playing game had sprung to life alongside commercial videogames in the late 1970s. *Dungeons & Dragons* was, in its turn, inspired by literary fantasy, a genre exemplified by traditionalist J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.



Space Invaders (1978).
Image courtesy Midway Games

Today, videogame RPGs are notable for the degree to which each new game adheres to the conventions set out by its predecessors. In Japan, where the genre is massively popular, the largest selling RPG series is *Dragon Quest* which, like *Ultima*, features epic adventure in a fantasy setting. The latest instalment, *Dragon Quest VIII*, has already sold over three million copies, and the series' main drawcard is that, though technology has advanced markedly in the intervening years, *Dragon Quest* has changed little since the first game was published in 1986. While other games tout their ever-flashier audio-visual displays, the series trades on people's reliable and conservative tendency to wonder if the new, in art and in life, might fail to be as functional or as charming as that which they have tested in the past

and known to be good.

RPGs' respect for aesthetic traditions is mirrored by the way they tell stories that evoke reverence for existing institutions threatened with destruction or radical change. A particularly clear example of this pattern is 1988's *Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny*. In the game, Lord British, the absolute ruler of a country called Britannia, has been trapped underground in a magic mirror by three demons called the Shadowlords. With Lord British gone, the Shadowlords corrupt the mind of the regent left in charge, Lord Blackthorn. Where Britannian society was previously bound together by people's voluntary adherence to a unique code of ethics, Blackthorn institutes a code of laws that force people to perform specific good acts, including giving 40 per cent of their income to charity. Under this impossibly exacting code, numerous Britannians become criminals and outlaws. The game's hero, the Avatar, must gather his friends together, defeat the Shadowlords, and restore Lord British and his more liberal style of rule to their proper place at the head of Britannian society. Victory sees players complicit in the destruction of an over-interventionist government, and the continuation of a moral and legal tradition that left most moral decision-making in the private, rather than the political, realm.

RPGs and real-world counter-revolutionaries share their goals: to avoid a fast and massive shift in modes of governance that throws society into turmoil and causes masses of ordinary people to suffer and even to die, as they did in the Terror that followed the French Revolution, in Stalinist purges, and in Mao's Great Leap Forward. For videogame protagonists, the goal is to keep themselves and the people they love alive and free. They struggle to defend or restore existing political regimes that have served people well in the past.

Because they are so concerned with defence of the existing, at the expense



Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny (1988)
Image courtesy Origin Systems

of visions of the new, videogames seem to fall victim to liberal economist Friedrich von Hayek's criticisms of conservatism. In his essay 'Why I am Not a Conservative', Hayek wrote that conservatism, 'by its very nature ... cannot offer an alternative to the direction in which we are moving'. But in situations that threaten radical change and the destruction of a society, the virtue of conservatism is that since 'the direction in which we are moving' is undesirable, maintaining the status quo is a sure way to avoid whatever the future seems to threaten.

What has made videogames so conservative? It may be that the conflict, threat and combat that are so common in the medium reflect much of the world's political situations during the times in which videogames grew up. Rocketing to commercial success in the late 1970s, videogames have straddled two major phases of conflict in the history of the democratic world: the 'Cold War' and the 'War on Terror'. They have existed during just one short period of comparative peace, spanning the years from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001.

It was towards the end of the Cold War that videogames turned into a major part of popular culture in the rich capitalist countries where consumers could afford the technology. Compa-

nies such as Atari, Nintendo, Electronic Arts and Sega first brought videogames into people's homes against a historical background peppered with revolutionary terrorist incidents and dominated by the constant threat of catastrophic nuclear war between the USA and the USSR. The prevalence of defence motifs in videogames may have reflected a constant feeling of threat in the major videogame-producing nations: the USA, the UK and Japan.

Once the USSR fell, the nations that had led the way in producing and consuming videogames enjoyed a period of relative peace and security during the 1990s. Free of the siege mentality of the Cold War, one might have expected that videogames would begin to leave the safety of the defence motif to think about new ways of organizing societies, and about other problems that the Cold War era did not offer the luxury of considering. And so they did.

As an example, we have the Japanese 1997 RPG *Final Fantasy VII*, notable for its political radicalism. In the game, a global company that has taken on the powers of government rules the world, and its relentless pursuit of profits has led it to consume too much energy, posing an environmental threat to all life on the planet. *Final Fantasy VII*'s heroes begin as members of an eco-terrorist organization, and the game begins by throwing the player directly into a mission to bomb a power station. While the heroes eventually come face to face with even larger threats that distract them from their battle with capitalism, the game never decries the group's initial involvement in terrorism. It seems impossible that any commercial soft-

ware developer would consider making another *Final Fantasy VII* today: its promotion of terrorism would raise too much of the wrong kind of attention. A slew of nostalgic *Final Fantasy VII* spin-offs are due to be published over the next year, but none of them revives the terrorism motif.

The 1990s were not entirely trouble-free for the democratic world, punctuated by incidents such as the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995 and the bombings of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998. Yet it was not until September 2001 that the democratic world again began to see itself under siege, this time from Islamic extremist terrorism. Today, we have returned from that peace in which videogames such as *Final Fantasy VII* had the luxury of exploring radicalism, to a position where a common political preoccupation is the threat posed to the democratic world by international terrorism, a manifestation of political radicalism. As they were in the Cold War era in which they were born, the videogames of the democratic world again shy away from radicalism and participate in our closing ranks against that which we fear may destroy us.

The conservative impulse seen in so many videogames may not be good at inspiring us to choose the future direction our societies will take. But today it is, perhaps, a valuable prophylactic against the self-flagellating belief that we ought to allow ourselves to be bombed and hijacked into cowering fear because such are our just desserts for the Western colonial enterprise that brought wealth, democracy and science to many underdeveloped parts of the world. At a time when many in the democratic world again see their security and their time-worn freedoms under threat, we should give videogames the praise they deserve for encouraging people to defend the ways of life they know and love.

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