Value-able Circuitries: An Examination
of Human Values Embedded in Commercial Game Design

Kyle Rentschler
New York University
237 Greene Street
New York, NY
1 408 348-3039
kar416@nyu.edu

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I describe my dissertation work on human values embedded in commercial video games.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0. [**Personal Computing**]: General – *games.*

General Terms

Algorithms, Design, Human Factors, Standardization, Theory.

Keywords

Games, ethics, politics, values, industry.

Over the past decade, video games have been commercially substantiated as a mass medium, in large part by its constituent industry that produces games largely determined by their quest for profit. Yet, these video games, as both media and technology, are embedded with ethical, political, and social values expressed through the various components of the games themselves. Here, I seek to inspect how these human values are embedded in video games by focusing on narrative design, game design, hardware design, and code as four overlapping and co-constituent layers. I also aim to examine some of the values that have been commonly communicated by popular commercial video games thus far, understanding which values and ideologies these complex multifaceted artifacts operate by and communicate.

Hence, the goals of my research, briefly summarized, are to understand how values are embedded in video game design by examining different components of their design, and to explicate commercial games en masse in an effort to negotiate the values they regularly express.

Understanding the values that commercial games embody is crucial to understanding ourselves in relation to the fastest-growing mass medium of the 21st century. Indeed, values and games have been perennially considered to go hand-in-hand in academia. Yet, it is only within the past decade or so that video games have been credibly explicated in regards to ethics and game design. In this project, I build off of these foundational studies, such as Miguel Sicart's *The Ethics of Computer Games*, Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play*, Lars Konzack's "Philosophical Game Design," and Jose Zagal's "Videogames and the Ethics of Care," and examine video games qua video games, as complex designed media artifacts that borrow from precedent but are also unique in their expression of human values. While synthesizing these previous studies, I aim to contribute to this subfield by extending analyses to popular commercial games, taking a close look at the social, political, and ethical values in the video games designed by the video games industry.

My experience editing Mary Flanagan's and Helen Nissenbaum's forthcoming book, *Values at Play*, has provided a framework by which video games can be analyzed and designed. Using this framework, I have broken down a video game's overall design into four sites of design regularly recognized by the industry – narrative, gamic, hardware, and code. Each of these arenas is actually an umbrella term – for example, "hardware" includes consoles, peripherals, and controllers, and "code" includes programming language, development software, and engines. The intent is not to draw lines in the ontological sand so much as it is to recognize all these typically-divided development arenas as co-contributing to the game products that line store shelves. With this in mind, I will treat each of these layers with the most fitting theory and most pertinent case studies, in the hopes of providing insight into how video games can be embedded with human values in each of those layers. To do this, I will be drawing from a handful of fields, such as narrative theory, computer science, philosophy of technology, film studies, and critical theory. By interdisciplinary integrating these fields, I hope to shed insight on how each unique but co-constituent component of a game plays a contextual role in the overall value-ridden meaning and experience of that game. Outside of case studies, I have also been playing and researching hundreds of games, hoping to development statistics on popular commercial games. By establishing, for example, which programming

language is most commonly used, I will be able to analyze not only how values *can be* embedded in programming languages in relation to games, but how values *are* embedded in the most common programming languages in the relation to popular commercial games. This more empirical research will help ground and translate the more theoretical components of my project into the games we play.

Although the theoretical underpinning of my project is in place, my research has only recently begun. That said, I do have preliminary findings based on research I completed via external funding during my undergraduate career at University of California at Berkeley and this past summer at Stanford University and New York University. One example finding is that melodrama, with its virtue-based Kantian ethics, provides the narrative framework for the majority of commercial games. Another is that rule sets seem to embody politicized ontologies subtended by the environment in which the game sprouts. These are two case studies I am currently planning on using in my chapters on narrative and gamic components. I have also done work on digital artifacts as politics, the interrelation between hardware and software design, game genre and taxonomy, and balance as justice in multiplayer games, which I also believe can contribute to my dissertation work. However, being at the starting line of a long process, my dissertation is still in a state of guided flux, which actually makes this doctoral consortium all the more opportune.