

# Game On!

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It is generally recognised that one of the forefronts of computing lies within games technology. The commercial incentives to produce "top 10 "games are enormous. But just like the music industry fame is short lived and once more the quest is on to produce yet another top offering. It is this that drives the technology forward in an attempt to recreate realism in every way and so produce even more evocative games. These technological advances are heralded by industry and adapted to new applications outside the entertainment industry. This is a rich technological vein to be mined but are there any detrimental costs?

The range of games is vast. They can be split into genres such as Action including Platform, Fighting and Hack and Slash, Sport, Strategy, Role Playing, Adult and Mature, Driving, Simulation, Activity, Classic, and Educational. A game may have more than one genre. There seem to be competing requirements associated with any games development project. Typically a game should:

- Cater for a wide variety of tastes
- Run on multiple platforms
- Sell at competitive price
- Be affordable
- Incorporate reward scheme for players
- Motivate to continue playing
- Be entertaining
- Be socially acceptable
- Not damage health

The implications of these requirements on various stakeholders could be profound. For example, children could be encouraged to spend all their pocket money (and more) on games to satisfy their widening interests of or even addiction to a particular game genre. Some games may be considered by society to be unacceptable because of the inclusion of violence, sexually explicit acts, criminal acts or other antisocial behaviour.

Acceptability has a cultural/regional dimension which affects the way in which vendors must operate. For instance one easily accessible adult game states that it is "the ultimate adult sex game. It contains thousands of hot adult interactions and features intelligent game play which matches interactions to the player status and the state of the game." It does however have a locking function which "ensures that minors do not intentionally or accidentally view any of the content of this game." Whether the inclusion of such a lock makes it more societally acceptable is open to debate.

A recent interview with a games developer revealed an interesting perception on the professional role of games technologists. The interviewed developer described at length the roles of five necessary categories of developers: Lead Programmer, Games Programmer, AI Programmer, Tools Programmer and Engine Programmer.

All had a challenging set of technological responsibilities but none had any which related to the impact on stakeholders such as society, parents, children and teenagers. Indeed when asked if there was an awareness of the broader social issues associated with games technology the response was to focus on the gaming fraternity and the developer commented that "One of the most important developments within the last decade of gaming is online gaming. Before this gaming was considered as a pretty anti-social activity, something that you would do by yourself at home. But with the internet and home consoles online play gaming has become a much more social activity." It seems the technologists are oblivious of or do not want to face up to some difficult ethical and social issues surrounding games technology.

As games become more realistic do they warrant even more careful scrutiny before release? For example, the very popular Hack and Slash genre of game requires that the player goes around the levels hacking and slashing through the enemies using different weapons and techniques. As the player proceeds through the levels the weapons or abilities become stronger but the enemy's also become stronger. It is claimed by vendors that such games appeal to those who want a lot of fast action as there will always be something to fight around the next corner. With improving graphics and animation will the realism of the game environment have a different psychological effect on the game player than earlier generations of games? Does the game player still separate the virtual world of the game from the reality of his/her own life?

One of the recent advances in games is the development of hybrid games which combine physical action and virtual action. There are currently two broad social categories on offer. There are those which can be described as innocent fun. For example there are quiz games with interactive buttons, dances games which require physical copying of

computer generated dance steps and singing related games. But there is a second more sinister category which centres around physical combat. The game player no longer uses the console to engage in combat but uses a physical mock-up of a weapon such as a gun or chainsaw or performs martial art kicks against a pole. These physical interactions are then linked to the game environment and the game player sees the immediate effect of the physical effort translated into the virtual world. There appears to have been no thought given to the blurring of the boundary in these combat hybrid games. This is concerning as we seem to be entering into an unknown world which might detrimentally affect the game player. Indeed might this have a knock on effect on society?

There will be those who question this questioning. The benefit of being able to blur the physical and virtual has so many potential applications in business, education, health and communication. If hybrid combat games funds this advance then the ends justifies the means - or does it?

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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