

**NATHAN HARDISTY - VOL.1**

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**AN INTRODUCTION TO VIDEO-GAMES  
AS 'SOMETHING MORE'.**

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## INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a world deep within a technological and social evolution. I'm still in this world as it brews with social change and global tension on a variety of issues. Children nowadays are living through the most intense stimulating period in the history of planet Earth. Social networking, texting, films, books, comic books and..

Video-games.

I remember placing my hand around that familiar controller that may or may not appear familiar to you. You might have already been alienated by the front cover let alone the next few bits I'm going to dive into. I grew up with a connection to this medium, I grew up believing I was in another world and what I was doing mattered. On a personal level, it changed the way I behave and react to people. I'm often a quiet person and only say things when they're either incredibly hilarious (or at least *sound* incredibly hilarious) or very important. It's changed the way I write, the way I interact with the world and finally it's changed my perspective.

I grew up believing that I'd be a writer some day, that I'd write books and short stories and be this writery person. I still am, but I've drifted away from a mind of fiction and more into something analysis. Why? Because I owe video-games something, they made me who I am, that might sound silly to some of you reading this.

"Video-games are violent, pre-pubescent time-wasters."

In fact, I'd agree with you. For the most part anyway, video-games are idle little playthings made to impress children and dazzle their minds with the whole 'violence is cool' cliché. I don't blame any of you for believing what you see on the news or what you hear from your friends. I understand a lot of you reading this may be a lot older than I am and I'll do the best I can to make you know what it means to grow up an entire medium sliding under your feet. Films, television and literature have all arguably reached their peak of means of expressing themes and ideas.

We now have a new medium under our feet, or you're just watching it slide under other people's feet and being confused. My mother is confused herself as to why I spend mountains of my time invested in video-games. It's because I believe they're not time-wasters, they're the most important medium in the cultural history of the human race. Video-games, unlike any other medium, allow the audience to not only choose their actions but to live their decisions.

This means complex moral quandaries and conundrums usually only observed are now in flux. In this book I want to challenge the whole world on a debate in our time – that video-games are violently, that they exhibit zero cultural significance and as a whole they poison our world with ill images. I love literature; I love how it sweeps away my imagination and leaves me full of character and just the breadth of a writer's mind. I often think they're capsules of a writer's very brain, from Steinbeck's personal input into *Of Mice and Men* to George Orwell's almost semi-autobiographical *1984*.

I perhaps love video-games on a similar level, they sweep me away and they've made me cry. I won't be afraid to admit that I've been touched by characters on an emotional level unlike any other. Technology and its means to express complex qualities, usually reserved for humans, have allowed video-games to simulate AI that interacts the same way a human does. It's often scary to find yourself emotionally involved in people who don't exist, who you care about literally rather than on the level of literature.

This book will be a collection of essays detailing exactly why I think these things, and why you can too.

## **SECTION ONE – WELCOME**

Section One is to introduce everybody to what videogames, what art is and talk about why everybody should care (not just gamers). If you already have knowledge of the whole ‘games as something more’ then you should probably skip this section and move on to Section Two.

## **SECTION TWO – POTENTIAL**

This section is designed to speak about the very core basics of game design. I’ll talk about the need for more designer/player interaction than game/player interaction. I’ll also mention lots of titles that have stuck with me as prime examples of the next step in our evolution as ‘something more’.

## **SECTION THREE – THE FUTURE**

In the last two sections I have introduced the concept of ‘games as something more’, and then accessed what needs to be done. In this section, I will outline the practicality and speak more about what designers can do. I’ll also be talking a lot more about what *you* can do.

## **CONCLUSION**

I wouldn’t recommend skipping the whole book, but if you don’t have the time, get right into this nitty gritty summary. It has a very nice quote too. I’ll also be talking about Volume 2, going into where you can find more of the similar thoughts about games and giving away my personal email address. Might be a mistake on my part, but everyone who soldiers through my clumsy writing deserves a medal.

For every section, there are four complex deductions of a topic within that section. They range from storytelling to globalization at its finest. Each topic title has a quote underneath it which will give you a basic idea of what to expect. All sources of the quotes found online and offline, will be in the ‘Sources’ page in the back of the book.

Let’s begin?

## SECTION ONE: WELCOME

"A game is a series of interesting choices." - Sid Meier, Creator of the *Civilization* series

What is a videogame? Fundamentally, right down to its bare bones, does Sid Meier's thinking hold true? Is it really true that videogames are only truly about choices, or are they just about problems? Problems which can only be solved in one way, while choices deviate in branching paths. How do we define choice and problems within a videogame? Is it the same with how you deal with within a movie?

Consider Tom Cruise in the film *Mission Impossible*. He is a badass; he wrecks havoc and kills people to save the day. That is all you know. Yes, he has character development and a love interest, all that good character-ness. But, consider this, if Tom Cruise is defined to kill everyone in *Mission Impossible*, does that make the film a linear course of events? The likely answer is yes but perhaps the procedurally generated response by us, the audience, is what turns it into a choice. Tom always has a choice to kill, he always has a choice to bail out of the train and he always has the choice to not be a Scientologist.

So, when we apply the same logic to a videogame, this doesn't always work as well. We, the audience, cannot really formulate an opinion on our own actions, only experience the consequences. We shoot a guy in the face, we don't think about his wife and kids and more importantly we don't think about what else we can do. But in a game such as *Civilization* (A game in which you build up an empire from a choice of civilizations, build cities, wage war; a real-time strategy game) this is all emergent. We, the audience, have choices and those choices can branch off a lot more than "Do I or do I not shoot a guy in the face."

To put it bluntly, we have more choice than Tom Cruise. The audience's choice is in how they interpret his actions, but within a videogame, it is how we go about making those decisions. This is the main crux of what a videogame is; a series of problems and choices. Not just choices. Problems are one-way, perhaps a sub-choice in of themselves. Problems are like a jigsaw, but a choice is the question which jigsaw to put together. It doesn't always lead to the jigsaw you might imagine, you might end up with two jigsaws within a jigsaw box and you get the point.

This section will look into problems, choices and what it means to be an artistic expression. The power and presence we have over culture and the raw energy that we possess in perhaps moulding the world. It will also challenge a few core ideals; the definition of art, the definition of entertainment and, more importantly, what it means to be changed by a videogame.

There are four main points I wish to make in this section, all under a main topic headline or some quirky sentence I can come up with. They are

- **Games aren't art, they're poison** – Analysing the link between performing virtual actions within the real world, why there would be actual reason for this and why you should fight back, why is it taboo for us to explore taboo.
- **Dictionary** – The definition of art, an exploration of its qualities and inequalities, challenging such ideals held by such people as Roger Ebert, why games perfectly fit into any definition of art.
- **Why you should give a damn** – The most important topic to handle, why you as a human being should care about what I have to say.
- **Déjà Vu** – Comparing videogame history to that of comic books, literature and film.

## Games aren't art, they're poison

"Children are being sexualised from an increasingly early age by computer games, pornography and sex-related slogans." - Dr Linda Papadopoulos, Psychologist

I don't think a credited professional has ever said something so insulting and false in the whole of existence.

Let me give you a little personal history, a little insight into my little sad life. Back when I was four years old, when I barely had any of my baby teeth, I was playing *Grand Theft Auto*. If you don't know what *Grand Theft Auto* is then surely you've been living under a rock? It's the main argument of every conservative news channel or 'reporter' in every country ever. Backed up by poorly researched university surveys and insight, but it's right because it's a university study!

Anyway, *Grand Theft Auto* to sum it up as plainly as I can is about slaughtering grown men and woman and running over their corpses. It's about being able to take a rocket launcher, run around a hyper-realistic environment and shoot people in the face. It's about actual game objectives and challenges based around killing X number of people in a certain time.

I was four years old.

Having the time of my life.

I was able to escape into videogame, escape from my little human life and take upon the image of someone much more able, and violent, than I am. Did this have an effect on me? In my entire life I've never harmed anyone; I've attended Peace Conferences and have only seen a therapist once. Maybe once more than too many, but the help that I sought to get was not stemming from a videogame problem, I'll get into that later.

Videogames had zero effect on my life from me as a violent person. They did not make me anymore violent; perhaps they even encourage actual anti-violence within my brainbox. It certainly desensitized me enough to see, ten years later, how messed up the world is. Am I a rare case? Am I the one who escaped the shackles of videogames and into the Promised Land? Hardly. If you actually look, not just nod in agreement, of many university studies then you will see the cold-hearted bias. Take my word for it; if the studies disapproved the link, then they would have disapproved the entire study.

Ask any punter on the street; ask your grandma, what you do in a videogame. I will guarantee that for most of the time they will say something along the lines that you **murder people** or that you **shoot things**. They're old people, bless their souls; they don't know that much about videogames.

One of the many attacks you will see against videogames, if you put it into YouTube, is the *Mass Effect* sex controversy.

In *Mass Effect* you take the role of Commander Shepard and must save the galaxy from an age old threat. It's a thirty-hour experience and, from a videogame point of view, it's stunning in everything it does. Tip to toe its story is brilliantly constructed and everything about it is nice. There are two main things you do in *Mass Effect*, shoot people in the face and talk to people to try to convince them not to shoot you in the face. There's also this shallow morality system but I won't get into that.

For a thirty hour experience, *Mass Effect* decided to do something different. It decided to deviate from the shallow portrayals of violence that all videogames have and start lightly concentrating on something different. Over the course of the game, you recruit team-mates and talk

to them in-between missions. It's a lovely bit of game design that gives you a breather after every mission and leads to player and non-player character intimacy. A relationship flourishes with every team-member. You genuinely do feel attached to these people and aliens.

So Bioware, the developers, decided to go one step further. They decided to portray serious relationships, involving a fifteen second sex scene. It was all very hush-hush and, in a way, classy. It wasn't doing it for cheap laughs, not doing it for the controversy; at least to me it was the genuine article.

The press, being the press, absolutely went nuts. They shoved a psychologist; a news reporter and a game journalist together and basically raged all out war on this fifteen second sex scene. In every news report I have seen, there are always more panellists or reporters opposing videogames rather than supporting them. In fact, in one case, it was one games journalist against three 'specialists' on the subject. Who, being 'specialists' have never played a videogame in their life.

So, this attack made it on the air, the games journalist (Geoff Keighley) was attacked from all sides. He made all the comments I made – 30 hour experience, it was not just between male/female, and you can actually play as a female in the game. Being the ignorant press wanting to shoot down anything taboo in a videogame, they made the same point that has been made for decades. Videogame corrupt our children, make them want to have sex and kill people and stab them in the face.

Clearly, no-one has heard of game ratings.

The press is pointing the finger at the game industry, largely applauding itself for doing so and patting everyone else on the back. Parents purge their child's rooms of videogames and then proclaim them that "They're bad for you."

But who bought him the 18+ game? Who bought him the game that allows you to decapitate a man or choke him to death with fibre wire?

The finger is pointing at the wrong people, clearly.

This is the same crap that television went through in its infancy – the accusations that it took away imagination and would rot your brain with pictures of taboo. Well, you shouldn't let your child stay up past nine o'clock, there's a reason why those programs are on after that hour.

When videogames and children mix, the result is one that many 'specialists' don't expect. I've seen it myself; I played *Grand Theft Auto* as a child. If anything, videogames have had a good impact upon my livelihood. In the same way film can, it has fed into my emotion and general intellect.

When a child kills a man within a game, it will have no effect upon him. When we go into the universe of a videogame, we do not operate under real-life rules. We are immersed within this hyper-reality; even a child can understand this.

So why isn't it bad when a film does it? Why isn't it bad when a teenager gets her hands on a vampire novel involving abstinence and sexual stagnation? They are respected mediums – literature, film, television. They are all granted access to this cavern that explores the dark side of humanity. The films that open you mind to how vicious the human psyche can be, the television programs that show you how incredibly weird we all really are capable of being: sex, war, violence, ripping a man's head off and throwing it into a sink and so on and so forth.

It is a tragedy that the general public is ignorant to the potential power of such a fresh medium: any medium for that matter.

Let me give another example, a prime one in fact, one that made hundreds of gamers angry not at the press, parents or any third party. This time, we were angry at the publisher of the game.

Its title was *Six Days in Fallujah* and it was developed by Atomic Games. Here is a brief history of it. The game was to depict the six days of the battle of Fallujah, an important city in the Iraq campaign. In actual fact, it was a horrible, *horrible* piece of warfare. Hundreds of soldiers, each side, were killed in the conflict. It was a massive outpouring of resources and, after it had taken place, a group of marines came back into the United States.

They went to Atomic Games, with a new mission, to educate. To teach teens and young adults about what real war was and what actually happened in the conflict. Those brave men challenged adversity and fought for freedom. It was a very sweet gesture on their part to want to create a videogame of all things.

Atomic Games started development of the game; they even got Konami (a very successful videogames publisher) to distribute it. Everything went well; a serious game was getting serious coverage. Maybe it was time for us to start to be taken seriously. We were no longer outlets of entertainment, but actual documents of history, a videogame could tell this story better than any film could. It was to a wider audience too, one that wasn't particularly educated in the subject matter, it might've inspired more armed forces recruitment.

All good.

Until the press got wind of it.

If you YouTube it, you can see the same scenario play out. A military advisor of the game and an Atomic Games developer were humiliated on live television. The news reporter took out her secret weapon, the mother of one of the soldiers who died in the Fallujah campaign.

To put the long story short, they made us out to be the bad guys.

Again.

The videogame was not controversial because of its subject matter, but because it was a videogame. It was poison. The public consensus says that videogames rot your brain and they're timewasters, they can never hope to portray serious subject matter. Ha ha! Ha ha!

I can, without a doubt, say that most 'parents' accusing war games of taking it to far are thinking with their heart and not their head. Yes, I entirely understand why (heavy emotional moments etc.) and I think they're not to blame for this, in fact in most cases, the news network is exploiting her.

Konami, the publisher, pulled the worst move in history. While the military advisor and Atomic Games made the same argument that I had, to educate, Konami did one of the worst moves in history. They bailed, they took *Six Days in Fallujah* off of their cards and Atomic Games was left without a publisher. For one of the rarest times ever, a publisher (of any medium) had not bailed because of the subject matter portrayed, but because of the medium that they had sworn to publish.

We were hiding behind the "It's just videogames." label, again.

Clearly, something went wrong here.

Those brave men who fought in Fallujah wanted to tell a story. They wanted to educate teens and young adults through the most accessible medium possible – through videogames. They didn't want to make it a parody, they were not disrespecting the dead, and if anything they were honouring them through a different means. All the names were double-checked and the player was able to feel within the battlefield. At times, I would imagine the game wouldn't be entertaining at all, but distraught. The 'shooter' genre that *Six Days in Fallujah* fell into was meant to be turned against itself, the game was meant to portray the atrocity of war.

Lovely.

Videogames are not poison, they are tools to tell experiences. They can be anything, do anything, do not judge them on what you see. Do not judge them on what is 'proven', prove it by yourself. They do not corrupt children, they educate them, and they have the potential to make grown men cry. Don't join the campaign against them, because in the end, you're campaigning against yourself and your own children's education.

If you feel that you don't want your children shooting people in the faces, I more than understand. I would recommend giving them nice family friendly titles up until seven years of age. Introduce them to more cartoon violence and when they're in their early teens, let them game whatever they want to game.

They'll be better for it.

## Dictionary

"Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control." – Roger Ebert, the biggest film critic of all time, hates videogames.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

If you don't care about games holding the key to a new form of artistic expression, then I do believe you're a coward. You might be thinking it's pure to uphold a statement that videogames should just be entertainment, but you're afraid of what they can be. I'm going to talk a lot about the word 'art' and what it means in this piece, but I want you to keep in mind that whatever the cost, you will still have your shooters. You will still have your fun.

Art is thrown around like slang a lot nowadays, if you Google "Videogames are art" then you'll likely come across thousands of articles deducting the statement with evidence and whatnot. They'll go into detail about certain titles, how they changed their lives. I'm guilty as charged of it, I did my own argument. Early this year Mr Roger Ebert posted an article making the blind statement that "Videogames can never be art."

To build his argument he wrote some convincing messages and it was rather well-written, but there were two main problems. Problem numero one was that he was really arguing against one person's argument, Kellee Santiago (who gave a talk about 'games as something more' at TED Talks), so it didn't strike a common chord. Problem numero two was that he gave vague reference to his own definition of art.

Four-thousand comments later, two-hundred articles (that I read) and many personal insults late; we came to a conclusion and as did he. He was wrong in attacking something he had no personal experience with, but he still thought he was right. He said all of this in another article he posted, accompanied by a poll asking "What do you value more, Mark Twain or a great videogame?"

Videogames came out on top.

The main giant point of the argument is not that it is an insult to videogames, but it is an insult to art. Art is limitless in its definition, as Roger Ebert himself said; he is yet to find a definition he doesn't disagree with. It is indefinable, subjective and it doesn't matter to pinpoint it. It doesn't matter that we come together as a consensus and all agree. Art is what we personally see it as, and if my definition was the same as everybody else's, the world would be a boring place.

My own definition: art is a piece of common threaded elements held together in order to provoke a reaction from the audience or observer; to change their perception on the world or themselves.

Naturally, videogames fit perfectly into this definition. But if you look it up in a dictionary, you'll find a different definition. There are hundreds of variations, here's another one I found: the products of human creativity; works of art collectively; "an art exhibition"; "a fine collection of art".

It's hard to disagree.

So if we can all agree on 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder', perhaps we'd get someplace. I think that art is such a loose but respectful term. It's been argued that games are art; it's been argued that they're not.

So how about we fit them into something else entirely.

An expression.

Videogames can express emotion, they can express feelings and characters and all that good stuff that any common medium can do. They can change our perception; alter our very thoughts and feelings. They can entertain.

Film, television, literature, comic books are *all* expressive mediums. We might not win the 'games are art' debate with intellectuals everywhere, for a while at least, but this is something we can all agree on. Video games are not toys, they're not just a collection of artistic elements, and they are an expressive force – a serious one.

I think that games aren't taken seriously and I'm not sure whether or not that's actually a problem. I take them seriously, I know many people who don't. I know many people who've laughed at me for crying over a videogame. I think that in the last ten years, technology has finally permitted us to be able to tell stories and express anything within this interactive medium.

As you can see from the Roger Ebert quote, he's in the wrong. If serious film and literature require authorial control to be respected mediums then I think that's swearing off videogames entirely. As in, even from a common entertainment standpoint. True, videogames are interactive, but that shouldn't stop us from finding new ways to express feelings and generally be all provocative. While it's true that we've yet to strike gold with this, we're getting there, we've come very close – I'll elaborate on that later. Is that when we become art? When both authorial control and player choice are held together tightly?

To me, personally, I hold videogames to be art and expressive. Films, after over a hundred years, are now a respected medium full of intelligence and all things artsy. The same goes for literature, you just cannot debate that they're not an artistic expression. They've had hundreds of years to become a staple of our culture, videogames have had around forty.

Maybe the future does look bright. Roger Ebert probably won't live to see videogames become a respected medium, so he is right for now in some way. What he is in the wrong however is the fact of defining art. I think that's practically an insult to every game designer, game writer and (now that I think about it) just everybody in general. Limiting art means you limit a medium, as in, give it a standard.

Potential is a common word that I throw around a lot in my 'games are art, you know?' arguments. We've seen little flickers of light which tells us what the future could look like, and I think we're close to having our defining set-piece of a game (I'll get into that in Section Two). I hope I've perhaps convinced you that we're all wrong and none of us are right in 'defining' art.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

## Why you should give a damn

“Who cares?” – Tim Schafer (*Psychonauts, Grim Fandango, Brütal Legend*)

My name is Nathan Hardisty and I believe videogames to be valued something more than petty entertainment.

If life is defined by experiences, those thousands of thousands of experiences, then surely in that infinite space of memorabilia; common expressive mediums have spoke to you in some form or another.

*2001: A Space Odyssey* changed my perception on science fiction, reality, humankind and is my most favourite film of all time. *Watchmen* blew my mind in how a comic book can have that much power. *Doctor Who* is my most favourite television programme of all time; I’ve cried at it, laughed at it, cringed at it.

Don’t tell my mummy.

In fact, I just noted they’re all linked in that they deal with science fiction themes. *Watchmen* touched on it lightly, still there though.

So, I want you to do the same: favourite television programme, favourite film, favourite comic book (if you’re into that sort of thing). They all changed your perception, entertained massively and were generally expressive. Some of them made you cry, some of them made you laugh.

If you’re a gamer, I want you to tell me your favourite videogame.

Does it have any of the things I’ve listed above?

If so, you’re a rare kind.

Videogames haven’t exactly struck a common chord with everyone, yet. They’ve yet to break-out into expressive joy, although to be fair, it’s *very* hard to do such a thing. Interactive entertainment is largely a new force and only a few indications have so far been made to what we can accomplish. Perhaps around the corner, we’ll start to get videogames that make everybody wake up and smell an expressive force.

What does this mean to you?

In short, in its very short, better videogames. Not in terms of expression either, that’ll happen, but in terms of entertainment. You will enjoy your shooters even more, you’ll find new ways to experience being a lone assassin and you’ll swear that the old days were nothing more than Sunday timewasters.

What does this mean to you, non-gamer?

With the amount of films that have had fed into common society, naturally, intellect has grown and snowballed across the last hundreds of years. Films have reached common audiences, struck an accessible chord. You don’t need to spend sixteen hours reading text; you can have somebody do it for you. In videogames, you’re both the reader and the author.

Games will impact your life, even if you don’t play them. People will be smarter, they will become more read; they’ll start to branch out from expressive videogames and look around the world. It’s exactly what I did. Maybe I’m reading too into it but I can imagine my children playing videogames and then tugging at my sleeves burning with questions. They are powerful forms of life enrichment, education and all that good stuff.

Videogames are good for you.

So let's just say that you love playing shooters. Let's say in ten years time that all games become all expressive and all that good stuff. Your shooters will be better than ever. If you've been ignoring the single-player portion of the game, it'll be easy to settle into, but you can just hop on online for a refined multiplayer experience. It's so popular that the light will never go out.

Everybody is a winner.

This isn't totally to say that the gamers who play 'shooters' should be locked out of all experiences. They are more than welcome to join us at the round table of expressive mediums. I have cried at a videogame, don't tell my mummy, but I'm not ashamed. I've been ridiculed of it, like people were ridiculed when they first started crying at films.

For the most part, nobody will believe what I have to say. I'm like the Mayans, nobody believes 2012 will end the world and when it ends they'll all come crawling back. Actually that's a very bad example because 2012 *doesn't exist*, unless you mean the horrible film.

There's no reason to oppose change, it will be for the better. Even if you don't game, you can do it in your own little way. Take note of the angry conservative news channels, the ignorant parents and everything else feeding into a negative outlook on videogames. We won't exactly be protesting in the streets, wanting to be recognised and have our own videogame Oscars.

Public consensus that acknowledges the fact that videogames are 'something more' will breathe new life into the entire industry.

I'll put into actual practically what you can do as gamers, non-gamers and so forth in Section Three but for now I want you to know that if you oppose us all then you're against yourself. You're against looking into yourself from a completely different perspective. Films only let us see into us briefly through another person's actions, videogames are by our own actions.

Let's change the world, again.

## Deja Vu

“Arts, is that what you call it?” – John Marston, *Red Dead Redemption* by Rockstar Games (*Grand Theft Auto, Bully, The Warriors*)

Haven't we had this conversation before?

In the theatrical masterpiece of an exploration of the Western genre; *Red Dead Redemption* makes one statement about the potential of film. The game is a Western set at the very brink of the Old West dying out and new civilisation (regulations and the government take control), it's a free-roam game by the same creators who made *Grand Theft Auto*.

The game is set in 1911, just as film was being pioneered. John Marston, your own player character, makes the above comment at a film show house. It is in response to one guy talking about the 'cinematic arts'.

I think that either Rockstar Games is being perfectly brilliant with its commentary (games as art in general) or it's entirely coincidental. I don't know. I think many more game designers think about videogames as an artistic movement, some of them probably realised it a long time before gamers ever did.

If you look at the history of film, you will see a trend alike what we're beginning to see in videogames. At the start they weren't treated very seriously, in fact, they were treated with a degree of comical exploration. There were a few brave exceptions – *Frankenstein* being one. But the potential of escapism into another world, not based on still pictures, was an entirely new concept. As film evolved over the decades, it became more than apparent the absolute potential that such medium could possess. If *Watchmen* could define the whole medium of comic books then I would safely say that *Citizen Kane* could do the same for filmmaking.

It was a celebration of cinematography, escapism and the portrayal of massively serious themes. It was time to take films seriously; on the other side of the spectrum, fun family movies got better and as did every other singular part of the film industry. For the most part, the evolution of technology helped feed into the psyche of new filmmakers – artists who were discovering the shown potential- it was as if *Citizen Kane* was an invitation to the world.

I can safely say that before every medium's defining set-piece (*Citizen Kane, Watchmen* etc), there is a period of not-so-serious expression. There is a period where entertainment is held above serious portrayals or any expression at all. That is a fantastic philosophy and this fits the bill perfectly for videogames. There is no denying that, above all, a videogame should be fun.

There are many people who enjoy prodding and poking the symbolism, the insights and the relevancy of serious literature and film. There are many people who just enjoy a very good film that takes itself seriously. *The Godfather* was a very defining set piece, one probably more evident in the modern mind than *Citizen Kane*; it too introduced new audiences to the prospects of the film medium.

I'll explore whether or not we need a *Citizen Kane* ourselves but for now I would like to communicate a very simple message: it is probable. It is probably that in the next five-ten years we may be a medium that is both highly respected and highly valued in its relevancy in common culture. That's a very long stretch; even I'm pessimistic in my approach. I would largely say that the problem with any medium achieving its artistic recognition is old people.

Not joking.

If you look into any format of communicating a message (literature not included because that's older than time itself) then you will see the main doubters- old people, the parents. The youth of today are growing up with videogames that are completely different to what they were playing over ten years ago. Twenty years ago is an even bigger difference.

It's odd then that we get this little delay in change (from a total industry perspective). Technology is making the trends, not the actual games. I have hopes that it will start to deviate, given the massive uprooting of fresh designers and game developers, but perhaps it will take more than them to make a difference.

I think one statement is more true than any, that I'm about to say. Videogames, or any medium for that matter, will not change without a general consensus. The publishers, gamers and developers have to be hand in hand to finally explore this new land of opportunity. Think of it as the literal American dream that games have been chasing for the last decade.

There are the magic two buzz words right there: *last decade*. They are so young in their realisation, not young in its actual time spent on the Earth, that games are more than capable of doing anything. The people, non-gamers included, who don't know 'games as something more' far outweigh those who do. It's not a case of intelligence or comprehension, it's not even a case of realisation or a 'eureka' moment.

If anything I can only boil it down to us never being an accessible part of the world. Our games are very complicated and from an onlooker's perspective, I can't imagine what it looks like. My very hands have moulded into crow-like features. It takes effort to lay my hands down flat. This is all from holding a controller for my entire life; I honestly don't regret a thing.

My hands are small anyway.

## SECTION TWO: POTENTIAL

"In a movie, one can always pull back and condemn the character or the artist when they cross certain social boundaries. But in playing a game, we choose what happens to the characters. In the right circumstances, we can be encouraged to examine our own values by seeing how we behave within virtual space." - Will Wright, Creator of *The Sims* and *Spore*

I love Will Wright

I think alongside him and a fair other amount of game designers/developers; he's very intelligent about deciphering game design and generally being great. I think it's scary to look on the surface of *The Sims* games (in which you make a family and control their lives cradle to grave) and just see a Sunday timewaster. In actual fact, all of *The Sims* games have done something extraordinary. I talk a lot about storytelling within videogames, which I'll get into in this section, but *The Sims* are one of the only few games which do a type of story that cannot be found elsewhere.

Actually that's spoiling a topic I'd rather not spoil. We'll get into the nitty gritty in a few topics, but for now, let's talk about something. In Section One I perhaps set-up the idea that games are something more than wasteful entertainment, in this Section I shall further that idea while making you aware. If you're a non-gamer, you're going to learn a few things along the road, if you're a gamer; you're going to learn fewer things down the road.

Section Two is about exploring our very potential. The titles that have come close, how far we can go, what great masterpieces we can upstage and so on. It's also about exploring the very logic and perhaps the practicality. Practicality I shall leave until Section Three, but I may briefly mention it. I may even mention how a non-gamer can get into videogames easily or at least get into the gritty grit videogames that I love to talk about so much.

If you're still reading this, with no need to carry on, then I don't know if it will get better. Section One, and the topics it deals with, aren't exactly my forte. I think the stuff towards the end of Section Two and Section Three are more along the lines of what I usually write. That's not to say I won't *try*, I've already been trying.

In fact, there's one topic in this section that I've been trying to deal with for months. I've been unable to articulate it and it's been a tough run trying to get down and research it at all.

Once again, there are four main topics in this section and they are to explore both our potential and what we've done so far to achieve it. The topics are:

- **Masterpieces**— I wish to explore the idea that the masterpieces before hand, of any medium, can be crushed by videogames. Eventually. I'll explore the power and presence we can have, maybe even mention a few contenders.
- **Shadow of the Colossus** — The story of one boy and his journey through a forgotten land. Mine.
- **No We're Not** — A scary idea that I'm going to start to implant in your mind. The direct opposite of what I've been trying to write about. Videogames can never be art, for a variety of reasons that I will explore.
- **Once upon a time...**— Likely the biggest topic of this entire book. Exploring the technicality of storytelling both within videogames and out. I recommend this one than any other topic.

## Masterpieces

“Each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it.” – George Orwell, Author of *1984* and *Animal Farm*

A medium, any medium is not defined by its very potential. It is not praised for its actual explored potentials or limits or any other figural sense of the word ‘exploration’ within a common medium. Film, television and literature are applauded for their experiences that they offer us; not what those experiences seek to do to enrich its very format. You could argue that *Citizen Kane* was not a masterpiece just because it sought to revolutionize its format (film), but because it was just a general masterpiece of an experience.

I think you could name all of the greats. All of the giant behemoths of storytelling and journeys and all that good stuff. Masterpieces.

Videogames... ha! Michael Thomsen of IGN compared the *Metroid Prime* series (where you shoot aliens in a face in a very alien environment) to that of *Citizen Kane*. Consider that for a moment. Videogames, with the potential to spread anywhere and everywhere with interactivity at their disposal... all we can do is shooters. That’s good enough, that’s as good as *Citizen Kane*.

Shut up, all of you. We do not need a *Citizen Kane*.

It’s become a staple, a cliché of gaming culture. The holy grail amongst every release ever. We need to prove ourselves amongst the greats. Which is somewhat true, we have long sought this goblet. *Citizen Kane* can be pointed to, to see how the technicality of film can be used to convey a message or insight into thematic whether they range from human emotion to loneliness to whatever. Countless thesis and media studies have been done about film, I only watched it a few months ago, and it was alright.

It’s not stupid to compare *Citizen Kane* to anything in videogames, it’s definitely not cliché in its principal to explore the potential comparison between our own masterpiece and another medium’s masterpiece. It’s healthy. It means that we broaden our reach and, if we explain it well enough, it means that more people will see videogames as ‘something more’.

It is stupid, however, to compare *Citizen Kane* to the *Metroid Prime* series. I’d get into the absolute technicality but (just generally) *Metroid Prime* does not use the aesthetics of interactivity to convey themes and intellect and power and message etc.

In fact, if anything, if this is all we are (*Metroid Prime*) then there’s no real point of going on then. *Citizen Kane* brought cinema to this mature level of artistic integrity and apparently *Metroid Prime* did the exact same for videogames. I’m not calling Thomsen out, but I’m calling the argument out. It’s very brave to say such a thing; the very argument was picked up on video for a major American news network.

But when people see *Citizen Kane* on the left side of the screen, and Samus (the player character) shooting aliens with her bionic gun arm... I don’t think they exactly think ‘something more’.

Let’s take on this *Kane* argument. I’m going to throw a few titles out there and say words.

*Shadow of the Colossus* uses a technique that highlights the very monstrosity of your actions. It is a game in which you have to slaughter sixteen giants in order for a God to revive a dead girl. Seems alright for common videogame objectives, yet, you are driven by your own self-pity to charge against these monsters. You are completely alone in this world, save Argo, your horse (the bond between you and your horse is strong because you have no other way of traversing).

After slaughtering around four of these 'Colossi', things start to turn. The beasts that you have to slay are no longer aggressive, they are passive. You come across a massive bird and you have to fire an arrow at it. This bird cannot kill you; you can only die if you're an idiot. You have to actively seek to slaughter the beasts, the tables have turned, and who is the monster now? This sort of player guilt cannot be achieved in film, because it is by the own player's actions that he feels guilt. If displayed on film, we would feel empathetic towards Wander (the player character) because of the self-pity that drives him to kill the creatures, but we wouldn't feel guilt for his actions.

*Shadow of the Colossus* can be analyzed until the end of time. I could do it right now; it perfectly shows how the aesthetics of interactivity can display something other than mindless entertainment.

Here's another one.

*Limbo* is a title that is very simple. It is about a boy trapped in a dark world, which you control, having to traverse his way to save his sister. What happens in this simplicity is a very dark mix of aesthetic tricks. The world is not displayed in colour (perhaps indicating life has gone from the world). Whenever the boy dies, it is not the actual blood that makes it so gruesome but the black/white aesthetic that highlights the actual gruesomeness of the action. Alongside this are many of 'player guilt by interactions' moments, such as when you have to (trying not to spoil) perform something horrible to a creature just to traverse throughout the environment.

One more.

*Braid* is very, very metaphorical. *Shadow* and *Limbo* can be interpreted very simply, they can speak to everyone, but *Braid* is perhaps more clever. It is a platformer that mixes in time travel and I won't spoil the rest in case you play it someday (everyone should) but it uses barebones interactive elements to create metaphors of messages. For instance, the ending of the game can be read in a variety of ways and not just within the canon of the game world. There are some variations that the ending of the game is alike 'the discovery of the atom bomb'. You have to play it to understand that, but every metaphor that *Braid* implies through its gameplay mechanics is always pitch-perfect.

I've given three examples of titles that can stand against *Citizen Kane*. Never ever would I think that they're all we are, in that, why don't we go one step beyond. Within the realm of interactivity, anything is possible. We are not limited by complete linear interaction with our audience; our audience is capable of anything. The relationship between the designer and the player can be something more than just the director and the audience.

I don't even like *Citizen Kane* that much. I can see its importance, but the *Kane* for me is *2001 A Space Odyssey*. I can write about that all week

## Shadow of the Colossus

"I was attracted, not by the idea of playing within a well-constructed set of rules, but by the idea of playing, experiencing, and adventuring within a real world. As a child, what appealed to me more than 'the fun of playing games' was the emotion conveyed by the works I experienced, and the way these works brought their worlds to life." – Fumito Ueda (Director of *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Ico*, *The Last Guardian*)

I remember that day.

It was cold outside. Not raining, not snowing; all was still. Lifeless, a plastic bag trapped in a tree branch, the wind against the bristles. All was well, all was calm. I was sat playing a videogame, and inside my mind, an atom bomb was let off. It was of a massive magnitude, it shook me to the very core. Made me consider life, relationships, the power of freedom, control, philosophy and so and so forth, it wasn't a film that revolutionized my very mind, a videogame. It made me cry; it broke me and put me back together.

*Shadow of the Colossus*.

To some of you it's a laughing stock that you can cry at a videogame, if I haven't convince you they're more than idle entertainment then perhaps you are right. You are perhaps right that we are simple timewasters with the meagre potential that I've outlined. What I've experienced and what you've experienced, in videogames, has probably been more diverse than anything. For starters, I've probably played a lot of them than you. The non-gamers who are reading this, perhaps you've never even played a videogame in your life.

*Shadow of the Colossus* is the one. It's the one. It's the one that would be our true swansong as a medium, as we fade into black as a different form of entertainment takes our place. The world is a busy, busy place and entertainment cannot simply co-exist. *Shadow* takes all the ideals I've outlined in videogames, distils them and then puts on a show. A massive great big life-changing show. It's about personal interfacing, the price of human life and telling one of the most powerful stories that humankind can ever hope to offer.

*Shadow* is a story of a young boy who seeks to resurrect his dead lover, or perhaps crush, *Shadow* is very suggestive but never deliberate in its story. He carries her into a forbidden land, journeying for eons on his horse Agro. The horse is his only friend; no-one else is there to hold his hand. The land is desolate and quiet. He comes to a giant temple, places her on a stone bed and a god above pledges to grant his wish. All that is required is that he murder sixteen giants which roam the giants. The story weaves itself into a race against time and culminates in the greatest game ending of all time. It has heavy metaphors, heavy interpretation and a wealth of other techniques at play.

When you seek out a Colossus (one of the giants) they appear monstrous and at first they are the aggressors. As the game shifts, the Colossi become scared of you, some of them run away. The very act of killing them one by one, becoming the aggressor, becoming the monster. It's one of those giant moments in your life where you realise what a monster really is. Is it the monster under your bed? Is it the things on the television? No, silly, it's you. Is it right to slay these innocent (often beautiful) creatures all in the name of love or human life in general.

There are no answers.

Through the aesthetics of interactivity, the act of seeking out to murder these beasts, the game shifts you as well as Wander. Agro becomes your only friend; you are almost forced to bond

with him. The world is far and massive, there is no way of transport other than him. I will not spoil what happens to Agro, it won't have the same effect on you probably, but I bawled. As in, red eyes and more. As in, tears down my cheeks. As in, hiding them from my family who were sat watching me play.

That's my story.

*Shadow* does not define its answers; it simply gives a basic suggestion of the very questions. It is the very potential of what we can do if we put our minds to it. If we ignore the naysayers, show the world what we're made of and start making great games. Not just entertaining but life-changing. There is nothing more worthwhile than discovering something about yourself, or discovering something that you didn't know existed.

I can't say any other medium as potentially powerful as videogames.

*Shadow of the Colossus* is a Playstation 2 title, it came out in 2005 and since then, it has perhaps led the industry in one way or another. But time is against us. To be fair on the naysayer's arguments, we have nothing to show for it. We have a few titles, one of which I can argue for, that perhaps point to where we are going. I don't think we need a personal experience, I don't think we need a *Citizen Kane*. We need something as an indicator.

Personally, *Shadow* is an indicator of the future. It's old but always refreshing when you play it over and over. There's a deep message hidden underneath and some people argue that you're not meant to look deep into games. You should only see the surface and that it doesn't matter if they're more than entertainment. To those people I ask one simple question.

What is a videogame?

It is a means of expressing a message, within a complex string of challenges. It is of discovering something about yourself through your own very actions. Actions you can physically perform in real life, or at least in complex context.

It is of stories, personal journeys. It is sitting in front of a television set, hands clasped around a controller, the action intensifying. Three guys burst into the room wielding weaponry and you dive into cover. The world becomes a hailstorm of bullets and swear-words.

Videogames are a life lesson, a process of exploring your own very mind. Think of it as the film *Inception*, we are placing our own sub-conscious into somebody else's dreamworld. Everytime we visit it, we discover something new, something out of place. It is sometimes hard to differentiate where the dream begins and where our own sub-conscious begins.

That is the fun.

A film lays out its dreamworld, lays out your sub-conscious for you (no need for action on your part) and asks you to explore yourself. A game does the direct opposite and allows you to explore the world on your own terms. Your own very mind becomes this weaving puzzle, your morals, your friends; your very definition of lie can be challenged not by somebody else's suggestions but your very own.

That's my story, that's my life right there. That's why I'm doing this, that's why I am the person today. It's why I'm a writer, why I try and tell stories on my own. I'm influenced heavily by the aesthetics of *Shadow* and the suggestive themes employed by the designer. It's odd that I have something against Japanese developers, not racially of course, they always carry traditional methods. They still stick with many of the bad game design mistakes of the last twenty years.

The team behind *Shadow of the Colossus*, Team Ico, do deliberately make these experiences. They see no other way to tell their stories and part of that is driven by the director, Fumito Ueda. The quote on this topic is from him particularly.

Team Ico have laid out the building blocks, they have set about perhaps a chain of events-a rolling ball- that could change the face of videogames. It's been five years, and they've perhaps been doing it almost single-handedly. There have been brave attempts that I've outlined such as *Braid*, *Limbo*, *Flower* (which I will go into later).

Their next game, *The Last Guardian*, details a relationship between a giant griffin creature and a small boy.

Sounds like fun.

## No we're not

"Let's face it: Games, in general, suck. Most are repetitive and shallow. Most eat up precious moments of our lives without giving us anything more than idle entertainment in return. The really good games, the ones that we would only be half-embarrassed to show Roger Ebert as art samples, are few and far between - maybe one game per console generation, if that. This is hardly what we would recognize as an "art-full" medium." - Jason Rohrer (Designer of *Passage*, *Sleep is Death*)

There's something wrong.

I'm going to explore this in the next section and volume... but to put it quite simple: there is something wrong with the realm of gaming. I can blag all I want about the potential of videogames, the power of expression and all that malarkey. Putting it into practicality will be one of the hardest things that mankind might ever do. Elevate an embarrassed medium into the heights of literature and serious expression.

On paper, and in my head, it's impossible. For when one ignorant generation fades away, the type that sees "Murderer owned a Gameboy" and nods at each other, another will rise. Quite a lot of the people working in the industry today only grew up with comic books and not videogames. In the next five years, that's all going to change. The gap will start widening, the people making games today will be the people playing them twenty or more years ago. They see games as entertainment, perhaps nothing more.

That frightens me.

Time is against us, we are around forty years into our lifecycle and yet we have nothing to show for it. There's not much indication of where we're going and, for the most part, the above quote is entirely correct. We are an 'art-full' medium but we might never be recognized as one. We're just seen as toys or little idle timewasters, maybe that'll how it will be forever.

Does art require consensus? Does it require enough people at the right time to nod in agreement? Does it require awards, recognition? Is it the brave personal journey or the news reports that define an 'art-full' medium. Games are an expression, they have the potential to exhibit the same qualities of high art but... that's it. Potential, always potential.

I've said this before but it's completely impossible to convince *anyone* on this planet of the potential of anything. You have to grow up with it, write about it and breathe it. There is nothing I can show to a complete newcomer, which I've tried to write up. I've tried to write up my own personal experiences but those experiences are exclusive to me. All art is subjective; such is the message.

What if it never happens?

That's the biggest, scariest thing to ever cross my mind. Let me give you a little lesson on who I am.

I'm Nathan Hardisty, I wrote stories when I was five years old. I've been writing fiction, exploring the space of 'the story' and been fascinated by it. Countless hours have been spent just deducting the 'three-act' story. But what blew me out of the water, what took me surprise, after I played *Shadow of the Colossus* was non-linear storytelling. It was not the author's story, it was the reader's. More as a writer, videogames excite me, the potential is riveting. It's glowing with choice, options, emergent storytelling and so much more that is exclusive to videogames.

Emergent storytelling has been around for centuries, you probably already own a piece of it if you're a non-gamer. Emergent storytelling is the story that the player tells himself, whereas

embedded storytelling is the one that I write out. It's the symbolism and character arcs, whereas the reaction of those elements and the personal journey is exclusive to the audience.

In a sense, non-linear storytelling has already existed: common literature. The journey of the reader. The emergent story from that is the greatest asset of mankind's existence.

Imagination.

It sounds corny to say such a thing, but it's true. Think of the character of Harry Potter, long before the films, how I envisioned little Harry and how you envisioned him are complete polar opposites. The imagination goes on a wild journey, as does the respective reactions to the artsy moments. When Sirius dies in the Potter books, it's shocking and all of that jazz, and perhaps the reader will react in a good fashion. In that it will change his perception of death or family or enemies/friends etc.

In a videogame, this is completely spun on its head. Our own actions dictate our very *reactions* to these events. There's a quote from the astonishingly brilliant *Bioshock* (a game that explores objectivism, communism and many literature commonplace political commentary. Even smarter in a sense, very inspired by Ayn Rand's work and views) and the quote is something that perhaps speaks louder than any gunfight. It's something which speaks more than any other element of the actual game. *Bioshock* is a shooter trapped in a radical narrative and philosophy, but this quote speaks for the whole game.

"We all make choices in life, but in the end, our choices *make* us."

That's spoken by Andrew Ryan, the game's main antagonist, who is the greatest videogame 'villain' of all time. He is not clichéd, not tacked on and he's present for the entire game.

It's an objectivist quote, perhaps, but I do believe it. I do believe that the choices we make at the very definition of our life. Not the shallow choices that videogames sometimes propose, which I will get into later, but the grey areas. The good of the few versus the good of the many as an example. I've often just thought about choice in a literature fashion, the way that the reader deliberately creates the experience for himself. It can't be done. Videogames do hold this potential.

Potential, the most used word in this book. Quite ironic really.

Choices make us. It's not the choice of supporting games as an art form; it's the choice of how we do so. Do we simply make great games, do we write about them, do we wait it out or do we just not do anything? Can we simply be entertainment, with bright lights shining every now and then alike comic books?

The choices in my life are going to determine who I am. I don't know in ten years time if I'll still be writing. Maybe I'll be in Paris, chasing down criminals and becoming a real life Batman. I could be saving the whole of humanity with my fingernails. I don't know, none of that might not even happen. Within the space of a videogame, it can happen. It can explore the grey areas of morality and let us explore ourselves, without the need for physical barriers or the like.

Potential.

They *can* but they're not even trying. Maybe 2012 happens and we all die in a flaming fireball. Burned to crisp, ashes to ashes, specs to specs and atoms to nothing. What if the whole world would end? What if every experience, every memory and every essence of your creation was wiped from the planet. Every person you knew, every man, woman and child. Every young couple and every warrior. Every brave Samaritan, every courageous philosopher. All gone in an instant.

But we would leave behind something, an echo; a shade of what we once were. 'No we're not'. We, as human beings don't yet have control over everything. But we have control over one

thing; ourselves. The echo of the world, that last sound that ripples throughout the universe; what will it say?

It will have many things in that echo: our stories, our scientific discoveries, our history and our culture. Maybe, just maybe videogames will be a part of that. The act of choosing is perhaps more striking than the act of answering. Literature operates in that the conversation is pre-determined; your answers back are all that matters to *you*. Videogames operate in that the conversation never happens.

This is perfectly symbolic of the average stereotype of the gamer. Socially awkward and hard to start a conversation with.

That's my life right there.

## Once upon a time...

"The choice between good and evil is no choice at all." *Story* by Robert McKee

Three wise men roam 'cross a lonely plain. Their eyes withered and the gifts they bear are weakening their old bodies. Donned in hoods and robes, they walk and step across the sand and grass, their beliefs challenged and withered. The night twinkles and dazzles a giant spectacle for all to see. It is the perfect night, the perfect night for such things to be challenged.

They reach their destination, a small stable in a small town by the name of Bethlehem. There, they lay down their gifts. There, they find one of the greatest treasures. An icon, a legend, a myth. Deducing his existence in modern times becomes less of a history lesson and more of a challenge of belief.

This is the story of Jesus Christ. It is the story that, practically, every person in the world can perhaps enact in one form or another. Perhaps in lyrical or vague fashion; maybe you barely remember any of it. Those of the Christian faith can recount it best; it's the very literal birth of their religion.

Maybe in a sense, it's the greatest story ever told. Everlasting and forever, as is religion. I have my own views on religion, which would get in the way of a book reserved for talking about videogames.

This topic is about storytelling. It's about stories, right down to the fine print. It's about characters, non-linear storytelling, the life of Jesus Christ and probably the word 'potential' repeated more than twice.

Let's roll.

Jesus was an alright guy. He healed people, taught people morality and all that jazz. He rolled with a couple of guys, his disciples, until one lad by the name of Judas decided enough was enough and betrayed Jesus. He ousted him to the Roman guards, but ousted him in a way that would set about a chain reaction of events that are in abundance today.

He kissed Jesus. Sounds romanticised, I wouldn't know really, but that symbol. Judas kissed Jesus on the cheek, to show the guard which one of the men was Jesus, but it was more important than that. The kiss was the ultimate betrayal, it was an icon; much in the same that Jesus is today. The kiss is a symbol, juxtaposing against its intention and the actual outcome.

In every great story and tale, there is a symbol. Harry Potter has the scar, Batman has the very bat, *Citizen Kane* has the sled, *Watchmen* has the blooded smiley face. All of them being a symbol and I cannot think of an earlier one than the one in the story of Christ.

Symbolism is a common standard amongst literature and serious artistic expression. They can be interpreted in many ways, subjective in their approach. As an example, here's something to whittle your mind.

Fairytales are told in a symbolic fashion, seriously. They start with *once upon a time* and end with *they lived happily ever after*. I can think of many of ways that speaks for the story. One way is that it's abstract, it starts with an overview of the world: once upon a time being *any* time, perfect scene for a fairytale. The 'lived happily ever after' operates in the same manner, panning out of to give a view of the situation at the end. The panning out into and out of the world helps send a message about the nature of the story. The panning out also helps closure come into play. It's a fairytale, not a realistic story or one filled with violence and demonic explorations of humanity.

You know when you're looking too deep into it when you start questioning *Jack and the Beanstalk*. In fact, maybe the beanstalk represents the Obama Administration and the problems in the cloud represent the build-up of the Bush Administration, left behind for Obama to sort out.

*Jack and the Beanstalk* is a greater piece of political commentary than George Orwell's *1984*.  
Yes.

That's symbolism, for you, but is it evident in videogames. Can we see how something might mean many things? Yes. The giants in *Shadow of the Colossus* fall after you kill them, which symbolises the falling of the hero as you go about slaying innocent creatures. The monochrome worlds of *Limbo* suggest it's a purgatory, the few lights that shine above might be coming from heaven.

Does it matter if the symbols are deliberate or not? In a sense, yes, because then the message can be challenged and be left for fewer interpretations; allowing for a more streamline exploration of the questions the full work poses. The bartender in *The Shining* could be seen as both a manifestation of Jack's fall into insanity or it might actually be a nightly spirit. That's finite, you might suggest many of other things but it's not exactly a statement on the Bush Administration. I attempted to analyse *Jack and the Beanstalk* in this fashion and it works more of an analogy for the Bush/Obama administration and not actual embedded symbolism in the story. In a way, I'm not letting the story tell itself through the symbols; I'm just trying to get it to say what I want it to say.

I think one great way of exploring something about ourselves is doing it along the lines of a character. A character arc can carry an entire narrative on its back, sometimes. The arc of Bruce Wayne becoming the Batman is something that fascinates me. It runs parallel to The Joker's transformation. How two men emerge from a traumatic experience and become entirely different opposites is a great character arc. In a videogame, this is perhaps our biggest hurdle, since the audience is left to experience their own arc on their own.

Player identity has always been a subject that's tried to be tackled in videogames for decades. Player characters with voices, player characters without names and so on. There are some indications of what we need to do. For starters, we have to jump one hurdle that the other forms of expression don't need to do. Pre-determined elements.

Pre-determined relationships, characters and so forth. In a film, we are the mere observers and we understand why character X is driven to save his wife. In a game, we cannot understand that. We do not love 'our' wife, we do not care. In the grand opus Western free-roam shooter *Red Dead Redemption* your character of John Marston is a mistake. He has a pre-determined personality; he has a wife (we don't find out her name until half-way through the story) and the biggest mistake of all: it is his motivation. The motivation of me discovering the story and doing favours for the characters is all because of a relationship I have no knowledge of ever experience.

Here's another example. *The Saboteur* is a story of an Irish race-car driver who journeys to Paris to get his revenge on the Nazi empire. His 'best friend' is killed on one race tournament or something, so that's all we need right? I'm not saying the narrative is the exact highlight of *The Saboteur* and it shouldn't be. What I don't want is an intrusive series of missions that all ask me to care.

The revenge/redemption story is one that has been done to death. They abuse the player's sense of identity in the world and alienate him from the characters. So what about the games that do this right? The most singular great player identity exercise I can think of is *Half-Life 2*.

It's a first-person shooter, one that is brilliantly designed and focus. Its narrative is not told through cutscenes but through gameplay. Visual aids and cues, characters talk at you while you

explore their rooms looking for ammo. They're not intrusive in the experience, not forcing you to stop and listen.

You are given a name, and that's all, the rest is all up to you. Your relationship grows with the characters because their relationships with you aren't existent or instant when you start playing. One such example is Alyx Vance, a female character who accompanies you for some of the game's segments. Her AI is designed as a follower, not one to be followed, and she will act more human than anything else.

She'll suggest things, about your relationship with her. You can see it as to just be best friends with her or you can want her and Gordon (the player character) to carry on and go one step further. Suggestions, not intrusive set-pieces of narrative or character arcs. The character arc of *Half-Life 2* involves both you and Alyx Vance, it helps strengthen the already deep plot and allow some exploration of your own relationships with real life people.

One startling thing about *Half-Life 2* is the way it addresses the player's history. Many, many titles all put you out to be the greatest dude/dudette in existence because you did something. Something which you didn't actually perform in the game, so there's disconnect between your very own histories. In *Half-Life 2* all of the non-player characters all comment on how awesome you are, because of what you did in *Half-Life 1*. That wasn't the Gordon doing that work and saving all of mankind, it was the player.

Valve, the developers behind *Half-Life*, has always preserved the great juice of player identity. Literature and film can treat us as the observer/reader but games have to treat us as a character.

What I've just babbled on about above; character arcs, symbols and the like- it's all something we can still apply to videogames. Perhaps stronger too; symbols through gameplay mechanics and character arcs becoming *player arcs*.

Non-linear storytelling excites me more than anything because of the potential (yeah I knew it) it has to be more powerful than linear storytelling; which is already powerful on its own. I once wanted to write novels and giant works of fiction which would make grown men cry. Now I want to make games that bring grown men to tears, games that define people. I want games to become less of a joke in a conversation and join the upper echelon of film in the realm of the conversation.

I mentioned that choice is our most powerful way of expressing something within videogames. That is true and I do believe this is our next choice. Making choices which test people, which make them search themselves.

This has been ridiculed.

*Infamous* was a title that can be described as a third-person supershooter. You're a superhero like person in a city that's left near obliterated after a giant event. *Infamous* gives you morality choices, one of the norms of games today, but choices which don't challenge you. One choice, which speaks massive lengths about the industry today, has stuck with me.

The choice is good/evil: do you defuse the bomb in the police station or do you *just walk away*.

That's a joke.

That's shallow, abusive of the potential and generally just not interesting. Choices define us, make us explore ourselves and the worst part is that *Infamous* was successful. It sold one million copies, got quite-high review scores and many people liked it. Some people even liked it for the morality meter.

*Bioshock* is a game which could possibly indicate where game narrative is going. It has character arcs, giant symbols and all sorts of brilliance. It unfortunately has a shallow compass of morality (yay!) in which lets you decide between good and evil (yay!).

There are the 'Big Daddys', giant husks of metal who protect the 'Little Sisters'. Getting into the details of why would be pointless but basically, the ecosystem of *Bioshock*'s environment depends on the 'Little Sisters'. They are little girls, engineered into monsters and have all this mind control and stuffs.

One of the currencies of the game is 'Adam', which allows you to upgrade all of your superpowers such as lightning bolts and the ability to fire bees from your wrists. Yeah.

In order to acquire 'Adam', you have to get to the 'Little Sister'. This means a giant fight with one of the 'Big Daddies', which is amazing in itself. It's one of the highlights of the game, requiring all of your powers and precise weaponry. This explosion of gameplay brilliance is all taken away once you deal with the 'Little Sister'.

Do you kill her or give her humanity back? The former gives you more instant 'Adam' whereas the latter gives you less.

What?

For starters, we're not asked the question. We simply consider the variables, more 'Adam' is good for us but she'll die and... Oh. There's a character in the game who throws the question out of the window. Basically, she will give you a reward for every 3 'Little Sister' that you humanise. The reward is more 'Adam'. In total, you get more 'Adam' for saving the 'Little Sisters' and the whole question of morality is thrown out of the window.

Here's something which would be more interesting: saving the Little Sisters gives you *no reward*. Nothing, nadda! No 'Adam' even from saving them. You have to sacrifice your enjoyment of the gameplay for little personal morality exploration blah blah blah. Games so far have never given us great questions, they have given us shallow variables. The question is thrown out of the window and we just consider the rewards.

On the entire flip-side of the question of morality, *Fallout 3* does something incredible. In one of its expansions packs (called *The Pitt*) you are posed with a conundrum. The slaves in 'The Pitt' are all full of disease and the slave leader's baby daughter is immune to such a thing. Now you have many options on how to deal with this.

You can kill the baby's parents and give the baby to the slaves, who are not sure if she will survive the research. In a total opposite, you can kill the slaves who stage a combat uprising against the slave order; in order to save the baby girl. The good of the few versus the good of the many.

It was a very interesting choice, one that challenges your value of life. *Fallout 3* is a role-player first-person shooter, it pits you in an apocalyptic wasteland and you are able to explore and survive in the world. It's a deep game, but even its main gameplay suffers from shallow morality. For every action in the game in the game affects your morality meter in the game, which again, is good versus evil.

We can do better. By putting a metric meter on morality we are removing the effect it has on the player, we are imposing a barrier; one that we are proud of. Stick on the back of the box and see what happens.

I enjoyed all the games I've mentioned, but I did not enjoy their way of telling stories. Through non-linear storytelling, anything can happen. Removing the 'observer' role that the audience plays, and asking them to question their own values is what could potentially make videogame storytelling the greatest ever in cultural existence. Dead serious.

### SECTION THREE: THE FUTURE

"The future is about emotion: reactions to events are usually far more important than the events themselves." – Patrick Dixon, author of *Futurewise*

We are in shaken times.

Wars, global warming, giant plagues, politics stuttering, corruption, greed, population growth, dwindling resources, cold hearted summers, education in tatters, technology dictating our lifestyle, a world alone against the forces of the universe and mediocrity crowned king in the court of culture.

Publishers, studios and distributors of all entertainment would rather invest into a good piece of entertainment rather than a great piece of entertainment. This section is about an uprising, it's about practicality. It's about change; it's about what you can do and what we're already doing. This is about the future.

The bad turns we can take the roads we've crossed and the lives we could change. If Section One delved into a concept, Section Two planted the seed of potential and now Section Three will seek to water the plants. I will not be holding the watering can and it won't be you either; it'll be all of us. We're gonna need a bigger watering can.

Potential is a shaky word, it's a smokescreen hiding behind other potentials. What I've said in Section Two could hold to be entirely irrelevant. The first section could be described as a easy drama, the second section was a political romance theatre production but the third section is a horror movie. It's about rising up to battle our demons and the true darkness that mankind has to offer. There are some scary things in this section.

After this section we'll conclude with a... conclusion. It contains one of my favourite quotes of all time and it could practically speak for the whole of the book. Making ideas is easy; putting the ideas into practice is hard. There have been many of quotes such as "If Da Vinci was alive today he would be making games."

I disagree with most of these quotes, I'll whittle down the logic, but I want you to know (before we dive into anything) you matter as much as we all do. We can make a difference.

I'm no Martin Luther King Jr, and I don't know how to put some ideas into practice, but we can make a start.

- **Rage against the machine** – Putting our ideas into practice, what you can do as a gamer or as a non-gamer. The state of the gaming industry, how we can change it for the better. Encouragement and such things will come over as well.
- **The truth** – The heart of horror – what troubles us as an industry? What ideas already in practice are blocking us? Is the world against us? I'm going to ask all of these questions and outline the evidence; I'll let you decide if it's futile to carry on.
- **Hook, line and sinker**– The casual market, the fertile ground of new gamers and the chance to change the world. The future of player interface, motion control; the most jargon heavy of any topics covered. The scary part is only just starting.
- **Goombas** – I'll be comparing videogames to comic books, and it isn't all that good. I'm going to contradict myself, going to punch myself and maybe just discover something. It's a process, and this topic addresses a certain game design element that we have to get rid of.

## Rage against the machine

"It'll start with a spark, and a great fire will grow." - *California's Dark*, Rage against the Machine

This is going to be hard.

Storytelling technicalities, serious artistic relevance, realizing our potential; is it education or common sense? To put it bluntly; it's hard to convince someone that a medium is worth revitalising. Is it futile? Do we do anything at all?

I'm a big-headed jerk with his head in his clouds. I'm looking down and I'm seeing something that not everybody sees. I'm looking ahead, into the future. Many, many gamers/non-gamers and even game developers/publishers do not look ahead. They are focused on their projects, focused on providing entertainment.

I'm not sure whether that's fine or not, because in such a massive industry even I want giant venues of entertainment. *Transformers*, as an example, isn't smart, it isn't artistic but it's brain-dead entertainment and that's more than fine. Fun is not bad, it's fun. But it isn't memorable. It's something we've got to get past; we're making surface value entertainment.

So what do we do?

We are human beings; we have raised ourselves from the dirt and created the word 'society'. We have culture, the arts and we belittle our own self-worth. I don't think you need to be a genius to figure out that something is dreadfully wrong with culture as it is now. Music catering to the young female teenager audience through sexually attractive males with auto-tuned voices. Film catering to the same market through... sexually attractive males all gawping at each other. It is an embarrassment that executives would pour millions into these creative projects.

But then I look at videogames, and I see similar problems. Perhaps film and music are stagnating and growing old, I can't listen to mainstream music anymore and so listen to independents. Film is perhaps going down the same road; you'll only get 2 or 3 really good, artistic and mainstream films every year. What about games? When do they get their grand opuses?

One every three years, give or take.

We're not suffering from stagnation, we're not suffering from any problems; we're suffering from support. *Limbo*, *Braid* and many other games I've mentioned; they are products from an independent studio. Want to know something shocking? *Limbo* was in production for five years, it took half of a year to animate the young boy you control; and the team is an eight-man effort. They didn't employ writers, specialists or consultants; they just had a story to tell. They had emotions they wanted people to feel.

Mainstream doesn't feel this way.

So, that's our first step, financial support. When the next giant third-person shooter comes out in the same window of an artsy looking game, how unreasonable would it be to just give a little amount of money to the latter? We pay obscene amounts of money and, being subjective, we're not sure if our investment will be worthwhile. But we'll get into the cycle, one investment and the full game in your hands.

Jason Rohrer, who I quoted a while ago, has both *Passage* and many of his other projects up on his website free to play. They are transcendent; I can honestly say that you will get something from *Passage*. Some people have cried, some people reconsidered their relationships with each other and it's hard to say why without spoiling it. It's free to play, with a donation button just to the right of it.

Mainstream games take millions of dollars to make, we keep giving them our moneys and then they churn out more and more titles. We keep re-enforcing the same repetitive mindset of the publisher; there's no other way to pay for games. Jason Rohrer lives a minimalist lifestyle, he's had to start working for various other outlets and people have called him out as a sell-out.

He has made little over \$54.60 in donations, whereas a big-budget game while gross millions and every executive will go home happy.

So that's step one; financial supporting the revolution luminaries and not the cyclical guards. I'm not asking you to stop supporting good games or in fact just give away all of your money, I'm not asking you to even consider not supporting mainstream titles; otherwise we'd be sending the wrong message. Greed is good, always has been. Too bad the fundamentals of capitalism keep getting... going off the subject matter again.

Step two requires much more than ignoring a mainstream release and buying an independent release. This is what I want you to do- whenever you see a major news outlet, newspaper or any outlet of information commenting on videogames in a negative format; complain. Write letters, emails and the like. It sounds silly and almost in a 'protester' uprising. Some have even described what I've suggested as 'hippy' like, but it's true. Once we start sending a message, and once the generations start overlapping one another, we will be the majority of the audience. Young people who grew up with videogames and came out benefitted by them; not murderers.

I remember watching a documentary on the subject called *Moral Combat* and one such quote from one of the old professors was "I am what I pretend to be."

Close your eyes imagine a pot of gold and you're a millionaire.

In fact, more seriously, go play a videogame. A violent one. One which involves chopping people's heads off such as *Manhunt*. You, as a mature and sensible human being aren't affected. We understand the rules of reality do not apply to the rules of the game-world, and vice versa. Its common sense and even a child can grasp that idea.

Step three: I want to talk to the developers. I want to talk to the young people who want to go into the industry; don't hide in the same closet. Here's what I'm talking about: the new modern-day first-person shooter called *Medal of Honor* has two factions in its multiplayer. It has the US Soldiers and the Taliban. It's a ballsy thing to do and it was done maturely, it's going to get a lot of controversy when it releases a month after this very book comes out.

It's already been called out, ever so slightly, by some people. I remember reading an article and the author said he will not support the game because his family stems from Afghanistan; and it feels uncomfortable for him to play as the Taliban. Perfectly reasonable excuse and you can understand why. It's a very strong thing to do and it's not a parody or a misrepresentation of the Taliban's action in Afghanistan.

The multiplayer developer, *DICE*, released a statement written by one of its designers. To sum it up as simply as I can (this might remind you of the *Fallujah* incident) "It's just a game."

Yes.

Once again, it's not meant to be taken seriously. It's just a game.

To all developers, all publishers, all young designers or aspiring games peoples – don't be a coward. You are representing us at the end of the day and it's not exactly good to be saying we're not a form of serious entertainment. Stand strong, all controversy is good controversy; just don't turn it into a giant joke.

Now on to you – the non-gamer. Step four of my four-step plan. You are the most important piece of the puzzle; all five-billion of you make up this one piece. Without you, we fail. Games sell 1

million copies, but yet over 40 million people once turned out to watch a little film called *Black Hawk Down*. We are reaching a fraction of the audience; we have so much to do.

You are going to find out that videogames are (often) stupid and completely braindead outlets of entertainment. They are ugly and boring, tedious and all of that jazz. It's going to hurt, in fact, maybe wait a little while. I'm not sure yet, if you want to come and support us all (until we sort ourselves out) then come inside and don't be broken down. Don't see the surface value, see what I see.

Gamers, you are already part of the jigsaw. We have to facilitate everything. Spread awareness, get your children on to good gaming diets; do everything you possibly can in order to go the right way. Your habits might have to change, but in the end, you'll be happier than ever. The shooter that you voluntarily choose not to buy, and instead fork out a small donation, it will still be there. They'll all be better than ever.

Time is against us, soon the young generations will overlap the old ones and then we will have complete control. We will all share a common interest in one form or another; we're going to make a difference. It couldn't hurt to start now.

## The truth

"Money is therefore not only the object but also the fountainhead of greed." - Karl Marx

This is where the scary bit starts.

Every voice of entertainment, every form and every sophisticated measure of distribution is all linked all via the longest running form of resource management in the history of the world. Money, of course, what else?

I can bet that many *many* people do not know how a film is made, or how a videogame is made. It's not on a need-to-know basis but I feel you need to understand it in order to fully comprehend games. As in, from their very core, why are videogames so shady/yet to fulfil their potential.

A game starts out with either a basic concept or a high concept, depending on which stage of development they are in with the idea. That concept is either prototyped, an engine or framework built around, and pitched to a publisher. In some cases, games are published with simply a page of information. This is perhaps the way that sequels go about, since successful franchises are always reliable to make money. Once that concept is shown to the publisher, and approved, they may ask for some changes. When the downloadable title *Joe Danger* (a motorbike racer, in which you can create tracks and all that stuff) was pitched to publishers, one of the responses was "We're not looking for games that are fun right now."

Yes, that's sounds ridiculous, but you have to understand that since videogames are such a young medium – the business side of things is not yet run by gamers. In fact, I guarantee most publisher executives have never played a game in their life; but most of them would have come from industries such as film or comic books. This will change in the future has people start to get more mixed palettes of entertainment intake.

When a game is signed on, the publisher gives the development team some monies and then they let them go off and make a great game. Sometimes, the publisher will intervene and deem some content "too strong" or ask them to belittle some aspects of the game design. You should understand this happens more in film than it does in game, most publishers would rather make a good game than a great game. If a concept for the game is too high costing or too time consuming, the publisher is the one paying the bills at the end of the day.

Once a game starts development it goes through many phases. First, artists come in and brush up concepts on levels. Game designers start crafting level designs and geometry, a creative director or a team of writers employed underneath him/her will work on the script or actual narrative. Programmers or engineers will tweak or even build the engine that powers the game. Every single game has a game engine, one of the most popular ones is the Unreal Engine 3, which was created by Epic Games (*Gears of War*, *Unreal Tournament*). If a developer wants to use the Unreal Engine, they'll propose that during the pitching process to the publisher, who will then license the technology out.

For every \$10 that the game makes, or whatever bartering they wager, Epic Games will receive a percentage of that. Licensing an engine means less time having to build one from the ground up, and also you can get to work almost immediately. Once all level designs, engine tweaks, main narrative script and little pieces (audio and music) is put together; they make up an Alpha Build. This means the game is massively buggy, but the main string of content within it is mostly done.

The build will be sent to QA (quality assurance) and playtested until most bugs are ironed out. While all this is going on, depending on the game, developers can employ an entire different internal team to work on multiplayer. Perhaps at this stage, dialogue for everything is recorded, since the main game script should be finished.

Once the game reaches a beta build, it is mostly finished. Some multiplayer games release a public beta, to allow the designers to test their game out in fresh water. This is a great way of getting feedback, some developers release game demos early too; so as to get even more feedback before the game is released. After the beta build is finished, all the smallest bugs are ironed out; some teams will start work on additional content to release after the game is released. Expansion packs and the like.

Once all bugs are ironed out and the game is polished as much as it can, it becomes a Gold Master copy. It's sent to the publisher who certify it and perhaps playtest it a bit through third-party QA teams. It's then sent to the game factory; it's printed out and then flown around the world to be sold as a packaged good.

After a game is released, unlike five years ago, it doesn't always mean the end of its lifecycle. Developers can add expansion packs or downloadable content, to add to the game. Some developers even put out an episode of the game and then put out further episodes (for sale) after the main game is released. *Alan Wake* a horror shooter had six separate one hour episodes and a few months after release, another episode was released.

So where's the evil in this?

Publishers have the power to creatively control a project, it depends on their techniques, but they also have the power to say no. They can grind a project to a halt, if one innovative feature is proposed, they pretty much control everything. If we want to see 'great games' then we're going to have to hunt down and kill every game publisher executive.

I'm kidding.

With new content delivery, developers don't always have to go to publishers in order to pitch an idea. The indie title *Minecraft* in which you... mine and.... craft; was released online at a cheap price. With the avenue of the internet exploding, developers can push content without creative levies.

But here's an FYI, they do not control the games.

*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* was a giant shooter shooting game, it was heavily marketed and all sorts of stuff. It had a giant multiplayer base from its predecessor and general *Call of Duty* community. It basically added absolutely nothing to games as serious entertainment and in fact reinforced a few principles we need to get rid of. Its idea of player identity is neat (your character does not speak when you control him, but when you control a different title, he does speak. You're sharing a character with the game) but that's it. It sold 24 million copies, got high review scores and was hailed as game of the year.

In an industry of such potential, we're not exactly financially supporting it. We're keeping publishers in the loop that all we want is cyclical franchises that outpour the same ideas and don't innovate or at least try something different. Original concepts perhaps have more potential to 'send a message' than enfranchised games, but there's still potential.

The problem with games, the giant crux, and the giant reason for this book is *you*. The audience. The one who chews up videogames that are 'good' or 'great' in your mind but in actual fact they're nothing of what we can achieve. I'm not saying stop buying them, but consider what

you're doing. You're fuelling the direct opposite of progress, you're putting another roadblock after roadblock in the face of this medium.

The scariest thought is that *Call of Duty* has peaked; it's reached as much of an audience it can. It's been at 24 million units for years, it's a stalemate. It's the end of the road; it just convinced millions of people worldwide that a cavalcade of Michael Bay 'war epic' storytelling is more important than serious entertainment.

Something is clearly wrong here.

This is the scary part; it won't stop. It's cyclical, you convince one person and then there's another twenty million to convince. In a way, it's completely futile. Given sales of indie games, they're not doing anything wrong aside from marketing or publisher support. Stop clinging on to your entertainment, stop buying up and chewing these things; start venturing. Come with us into the promise land.

The truth is that there is no hope for games as a serious form of entertainment; we're stuck in a stalemate. We could practically achieve anything at this given moment, we are the key.

Until we realise that, nothing is going to change.

## Hook, line and sinker

"Art challenges the technology, technology inspires the art." - John Lasseter (Pixar Studios, *Toy Story*, *Cars*, do I need to list them all?)

There are one-billion gamers in the world, on many levels of the social group spectrum. Let's take a trip shall we.

There are much separated groups, all having sub-groups and sub-sub-groups within those sub-groups. They all have definitions, which are loose and varied in the community of gamerkind. In fact, if anything, there are no criteria for any label – just how you see fit. There are casual gamers, family gamers, hardcore gamers, PC gamers, traditional gamers, blind gamers, kinetic gamers, fitness gamers, professional gamers, dedicated gamers...

Hardcore gamers are the ones who apparently 'make the rules'. I don't see myself as these guys, since for the most part, they're assholes. They have sub-groups called 'fanboys' – millions of people who argue with each other on who has the better format. They are the most counter-productive people in the whole of existence, they would rather argue about the Playstation 3 having better graphics than arguing about games as a means of serious entertainment. I hate them, and most of the time they are illiterate thugs who, in response to serious discussion about games, just don't understand.

I once made an article exploring storytelling conventions in videogames, to which the main response was that I'm an apparently an idiot. If you browse many collections of games journalism or news, the top articles will be 'Top Ten' lists or 'Why Halo is bad'.

It's saddening, depressing, that the people with perhaps the most insight and personal history affiliated with games are so *stupid*. I'm no Albert Einstein, but I am at least trying.

PC gamers are the ones who look down upon the hoard of console gamers, the PC is the platform with the most potential in technology and general limits (none, really), but console platform is the most accessible. It's very prudent to put anyone below you, and I think they're counter-productive as well.

Traditional or retro gamers are those who play strictly retro games, the good old days. They like trawling through nostalgia; I don't see anything wrong with that.

Professional gamers are people who work their thumbs to nothing, become mindless robots or complete polar opposites; they play games for money. They beat high scores, play against masses of people in first-person shooters and basically might never play another game at all. I've read some cases where a professional gamer just played *Counter-Strike* (a multiplayer first-person shooter) for his entire career. He wasn't allowed, or he didn't allow himself, to play anything else.

All of the above (more than likely) grew up with videogames. From the youngest of ages, they became an escape. Now, this dynamic of how people can emerge differently from such similar events is something that I like to compare to Batman and the Joker. They each experience a traumatic experience and come out of it differently, not exactly good/evil either. I make the argument that Batman is more insane than the Joker, out of his self-pity and guilt, he has created madness. To which he uses to go around at night and beat criminals up.

But there's a new advent on the horizon. As technology has become more powerful and graphics have sometimes been seen more important than the actual 'game' parts, a new social group is on the rise. It's been on the rise for some time, thanks to flash-based games such as Farmville.

The casual revolution.

Casual gamers are people who don't play games, more than likely; they only play a singular title on a certain motion control required console. When the Wii launched, it pretty much destroyed *everything* and is well on its way to becoming the biggest console ever sold to date. It's reached new audiences, peaked interest and delivered an accessible experience. It's even won 'Console of the Decade' by many outlets.

It's not exactly a good show.

The reality is, the Wii has faced mountains upon mountains of shovel-ware. Shovel-ware games are badly designed clones of popular franchises, with a stitched together brand or appeal slapped on top. In other words, the Wii has fewer games worth playing, and yet it's somehow proclaimed to be the greatest console of the decade. Don't get me wrong, the Wii certainly has some hidden gems and some of the main games that Nintnedo supports are phenomenally fun.

What we're doing with this casual audience is not healthy. We are not introducing a console; we are introducing a board game. It's used once a month, when all the family/friends are around, and (in most cases) you never need buy another game for it. The console comes packaged with Wii Sports, making the whole 'buying games' thing completely redundant. In their mind, they've seen everything that gaming has to offer.

This is nearly 100 million people we are talking about; that quite frankly outnumbers every social group. That's even a rough estimate on my part; taking into account the sales of the Wii. 100 million casual gamers, not strictly buying the Wii, but perhaps playing applications such as Farmville. Not to say these aren't 'games', but they don't have a rudimentary core focus of videogames. When I play a videogame, I'm already looking forward to the next one I hope to play. In the minds of casual gamers everywhere, they only just want to play one game for the rest of their life OR they have no reason to play anything else.

This is dangerous, not only does it alienate people from the 'main market' but we even enforce these rules. We as gamers define gamers, we label them, and we don't let casual gamers come join us at the round-table. We are more than happy to let this slide; we are ignoring the damage we will eventually do to ourselves.

If we are to survive, financially, as a medium; we must seek new audiences. We have not peaked as a full industry, and we might never will.

The whole of gaming will crash down on our heads unless we start taking basic steps to saving the whole of fledging new form of serious entertainment. I'm going to outline a few but I clearly have no real idea of how to handle this.

The first step is the most basic one – don't be a racist. No, dead seriously, don't discriminate against different social groups of gamers. Don't post on message boards, don't talk down to them, and encourage them. Encourage them to play different games, buy 'good' games for their consoles or gift them at Christmas. The littlest title can turn the casual into a fully fledged dedicated gamer.

The second step is to introduce them to the same concepts I've outlined. Start off very simple, play a simple control interface requiring game such as *Limbo* in which there are only two buttons. Move on to more complex games, the 'hardcore' titles are very intimidating with the HUDs and HDs and online interfaces, but keep them along a path of showing them what games are capable of.

Step three: read my book. Yes, it sounds very silly but I think I've done a good job of telling everyone that games are more than family entertainment or murder simulations. If you think I've done a terrible job then perhaps explain it to them yourself.

That's it, that's all I can say about this new 'casual' demographic. In fact, we're going to get a lot more. This November, a peripheral called 'Kinect' will be released that will work with the Xbox 360. It's basically a camera that allows you to waggle your arms and perform on screen actions instead of using traditional controllers. This is very silly; obviously family marketed and will alienate both sides of the spectrum. From my gamer point of view: there are no games worth getting the Kinect for. It's basically a whole new interface without nothing to interface with, or anything worthwhile for that matter.

It's going to be heavily marketed, your gran is going to talk about it and the family will end up throwing it away three years down the line like the poor sodden Wii.

Why not stop this cycle, give me a hand to change the world.

## Goombas

“Games can be about space exploring and eating breakfast and falling in love and shooting someone in the head and taking your daughter to school for the first time and learning about your father dying and slowly aging and grabbing someone by the head then ripping it open and eating their brain and then peeing on it. They can about anything with all the powers of interactivity and agency and immersion that they have and right now they’re just primarily about one thing from what the mainstream publishers are concerned... and that is terrifying.” – Anthony Burch (Gearbox Studios Writer, former Features Editor for Destructoid).

I’ve saved the scariest until last. This is something that has plagued me for years, possibly ever since I started playing videogames. Probably that little niggle at the back of your head; the little voice telling you that everything isn’t alright. We are repulsed by the idea of any medium being boiled down to representing one theme over and over again: every film being a romantic comedy, every book being of the horror genre. It is terrifying, it is terrifying to see any loved medium boiled down and all of its potential dissected. That is what we have been doing.

Ladies and gentlemen. Boys and girls, I have cracked the code. I have found the main problem, the big giant amoeba which is obstructing our view of the future. The lock upon which we need to forge a key. It’s been staring us in the face for so long, we’ve asked this question before.

Videogames are made for children.

The very statement I said at the start of this book; it is not sarcasm. It is not a joke, it is fact. I’m going to make up facts and figures all throughout this thing but if you just look at every game ever made – 95% of games are macho-male power fantasies that hunger for more. Gamers would rather realistic graphics than artistic relevancy – the support might never be there. They will die, withering at first and then go out with but a whimper of what they could be.

If you yourself are a gamer, I want you to take out your entire gaming library. All of it. Dump it on the floor and start separating them into groups. If the game has a gun in it or exhibits violence on some level; put it on your left hand side. If it does anything else; put it on the right.

Unless you don’t own any videogames at all, or have just *bought Superfun Family Fun Fun Time 3*; more than likely the left outweighs the right. Isn’t that scary? Do you feel any remorse for what we’ve accomplished? Together, as people who have bought and cherished games for years and years, the truth has been before our eyes the whole time. We’re twelve year olds playing games within a different body. There are designers out there who are told to make their games more violent, more destructive and less relevant in the minds of gamerkind.

And there is nothing we can do about it.

Violence, sex and war are all integral parts of any artistic form ever. They show the dark side of humanity venture forth and show its ugly side. They make us think about ourselves, our choices and life in general. Almost every videogame ever made *ever* does not do this. In fact, they glorify violence. They teach us that getting kills is a good thing, not in actual practical sense and turn us into murderers, but when Nathan Drakes snaps someone’s neck in *Uncharted 2* (basically the best Indiana Jones games ever made) and then laughs about it... what are we to think?

If games are going to be violent for the rest of forever, there is no point. There is no point turning the tide of the mainstream machine. It’s been too long, we’re held at the door by corporations and executives. It’s over, go home and rest your heads. Go read; go see great films; because videogames will *never* be able to reach that potential. Roger Ebert stands atop a hillside,

correct in everything he has said. Gamerkind sleeps well that night; they know nothing of the horrors that have transpired. They will wake up in the morning to return to the adolescent endearing games, to the murder simulations, to the alienating fantasies. Their world will not change. While they game happily, many people like me will hang our heads in shame. In shame of once crying at a videogame, in shame of devoting your life to arguing for their place in society, in shame of the medium.

And that's what's bound to happen.

Don't get me wrong, shooting games and violent games can show glimmers of potential. *Bioshock* has a massively stretching narrative and overarching political themes; but when one of our most treasured games is still about finding inventive ways to kill people – what does that say about our industry? *Shadow of the Colossus* uses violence to its full effect and makes the player feel guilty. Anthony Burch, who I quoted above, once said that it made him retrospectively think about every videogame enemy that he'd killed.

All the goombas I've squashed, all the people I've shot, all the giants I've slain, all the men I've set ablaze, all the widows and widowers and orphans I've made – it's all been in vain. The end.

Goombas are those little mushroom people that you jump on, in Mario, by the way.

That's it people, that's the end. There is nothing we can do. Shooting games, big budget male power fantasies which sell millions and make billions; there is no incentive to do anything else. We are killing off the industry one by one, letting the potential slide into the dirt. We are alienating potential new markets – females, casual gamers. There are over one billion gamers in the world, but there have been billions who have read books and seen films and cried and wept over them.

As far as I can see, there is absolutely no hope. There is nothing we can do but clutch at straws and hope for the best.

So... what do we do? We can't just stop buying games because that will effectively kill off the full medium. I can't expect you all to selectively choose your gaming diets because I'm still guilty as charged. I'm going to be investing into violent games or shooters this year.

In fact, it's not actually that big of a surprise that people pick on us. We advertise guns and violence on the television sets, plug it into everyone's minds. It's all we do and I haven't seen a report about *Limbo* making kids go out and tear limbs off of animals. It's no surprise we're looked down upon by society for only showing adolescent fantasies and violence.

For once, I am stumped on what to do next. I have talked and talked about games having cultural relevancy, we are taking the slowest steps but perhaps are now faced with a wall. A big huge rock in the middle of the road, there is nothing we can do. We are running around like headless chickens, it's all going downhill from here.

I think it's better to be prepared for this than to just let it happen. If, in ten years time, we are still playing games which let you strangle, maim and shoot over and over; then I'm calling it quits. It's the inevitable; the whole of our potential will be forgotten. This eBook will be eBurned. The world will walk by, one-hundred years from now, shops which once displayed packages of pixelated violence. The world will walk by houses that held gamers in their confines, which went about their virtual intake of shooting people in the face. When I'm dead and buried, the world will forget me.

We did not stand a chance.

But what if I'm wrong. What if I am completely and utterly wrong? What if the world suddenly said overnight that games can hold artistic merits? What if we all prepared, all put our arms up and said enough is enough. We've had it with these snakes on our planes, with the guns on our boats, with the same repetition over and over, the same themes and the same public outcry.

We do not corrupt children, so let's show we do the complete opposite. Let's grow up and make great games instead of the same games, let's be different, let's show the world that we (as gamerkind) will rise up and take over the world.

When I'm old, withered and my hands are clasped around that controller for the last time. When my bones cannot take anymore, when my heart lets out a final plea for help, when the nurse comes over to check my eyes; I hope she will not see a dying man. She will not see a pathetic waste of space who tried and failed, along with many who once live, she will see something different.

Hope.

## CONCLUSION

“This will take real courage from within our industry. It will take the bravery to face critique and the fortitude to weather outcry. It will ask that we expose ourselves to short-term financial risk and that we don’t back down from the early losses, firm in the knowledge that we are doing the right. We will have to be steadfast under the scrutiny of the world and resolute when we are asked to justify ourselves in the court of public opinion. It will ask, for the moment, we give up ease. But if we can do this we can do good. Real good with our medium. If we do this we can expand the industry and bring whole new genres to the purview of games. If we do this we can turn a greater profit while providing more meaningful experiences and reach audiences hither to unthinkable. If we do this we can perhaps elevate some small portion of our labour to an art. But if we do this we will no longer be able to pretend as if what we do doesn’t matter. If we do this, we can never go back to the way it was before.” – James Portnow, CEO Rainmaker Games

‘Nuff said.

Hopefully I haven’t rambled on. Hopefully I’ve convinced, or fully seeded, the idea of games as something more. I’ve outlined what we can do to help us along our journey, but the future is not up to me. All I can do is point and say go and it is up to you to make the smallest difference. It’s going to be hard, it’s going to take faith and it’s not all going to rest upon the developer’s shoulders.

I’m Nathan Hardisty and I’ve been a games writer for three years, and this is a perhaps a culmination of every think and thought I’ve had swimming in my mind. Next year I plan to write strictly about storytelling techniques in every medium ever, under a title I quite haven’t thought of yet. I know it will be free and available as an eBook, but I’m not exactly going to get anywhere in videogames. I’m thinking quite heavily about the future and I’ve decided at some point I’m going to have to continue this process.

Volume 2 of this series will focus on core game design features, sports games and motion control and will be more about the good side of games than the bad. I’ll be calling out a lot of prime examples in our industry, and I may get a developer or two in to write up on a topic of their choice. We’ll see.

There’s a thank you page after this darn thing, including all of my inspirations and friends and families and pets and furniture. If you’re reading this and you think you deserve a shout-out... sit down!

But more importantly, if I haven’t thanked you already, thank you Mr Reader. You’ve done something importantly today. If I’ve failed to convince you that games are something more than idle entertainment, I’ve at least stimulated your mind to think outside the box. If you’re a non-gamer, maybe I’ve convinced you to start gaming or at least see us in a different way. If you’re a gamer of any social group, perhaps I’ve convince you that we’re all just gamers in the end. If you’re an illiterate fanboy thug who would rather argue that console X is better than console Y, then you’ve probably not even got past the title.

Understand this; the world is a scary place. It’s a dark place full of corruption, greed and insecurity. We have the potential to do something that no other venue of entertainment can ever employ. We have the potential to make audiences feel, not ask them to feel as observers, but as characters.

Let’s not miss our chance.

## THANKS AND INSPIRATIONS

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And you, the reader.

You're awesome.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nathan Hardisty is a sixteen year old something living in an England something. He likes games, a little bit, and likes writing, a little bit. Writing from an early age he eventually realised he is writing this very semi-biography. Lovely jubilee.

I've written for Platform Nation, started many of blogs under the 'Blogossus' title and 'The Purple View'. If you happen upon these blogs, don't read them, they're some of my earlier work and they're so poorly written that a monkey could write better than I could. At the time anyway. WHATEVER.

You can find ALL of my work here –

<http://blogossus.wordpress.com/portfolio/>

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