

Challenging the System

EXPLORING POLITICAL COMMENTARY IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

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Video game narratives are often rife with themes of injustice and corruption of power.

To attempt to count the sheer amount of rebellious, rogue leader-type protagonists featured in these digital storybooks would be a futile task. Such games allow us to immerse ourselves in virtual worlds that open our minds to somewhat challenging and deep issues in a relatively safe, comfortable and even fun environment.

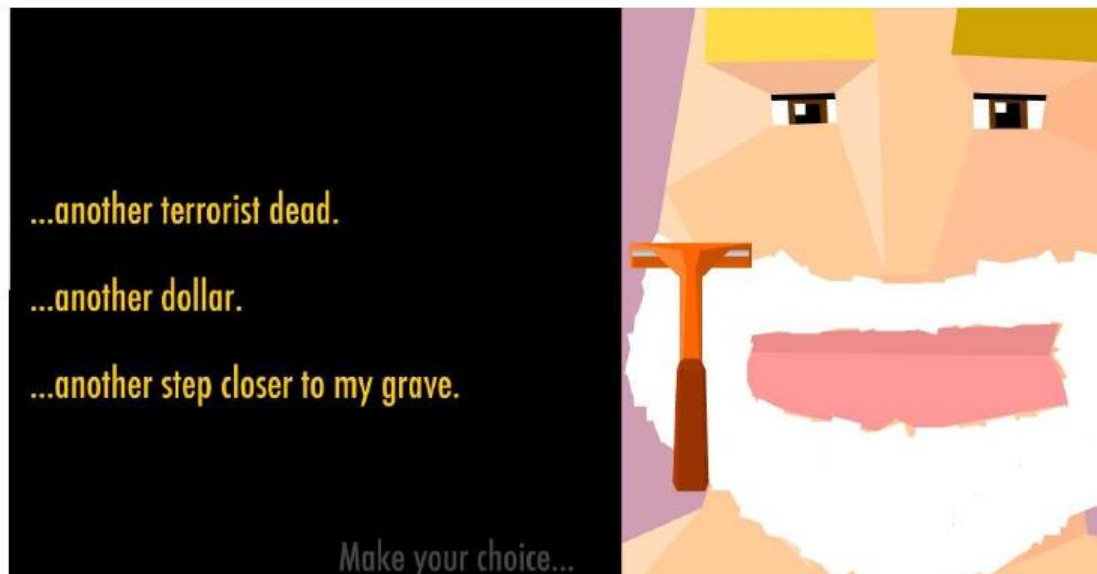
Yellow Umbrella is one fairly recent release that proves you don't have to commit yourself to shouting through a megaphone and waving homemade flags in the streets to get a taste for activism. Released November last year, the game was made in just five days after one of the game's developers witnessed police attacking protesters with tear gas in Hong Kong's financial district. The protesters were camped out as part of the Occupy Central movement. The game was a runaway success, earning over 100,000 downloads through Google Play in the first month alone. With the slogan of 'this is not a revolution, we ask for democracy and peace,' Yellow Umbrella challenges the player to defend themselves against the oncoming police force and angry locals without violent means. This anti-combat approach seeks to demonstrate the possibility of resolution through peaceful protest, whilst highlighting the unjust amount of police brutality witnessed during such demonstrations.

The negative connotations surrounding violence are also explored in September the 12th: A Toy World, this time as a comment on the war on terror. Defiantly not anti-war, September the 12th is a 'newsgame' that seeks to teach that violence can only beget more violence, and is never a means to a



Below: Unmanned shows us that sometimes you can't help but take your work home with you.

"BY NOW, YOU MAY BE WONDERING WHEN THE HELL GAMES GOT SO SERIOUS."





Left: Spec Ops The Line is infamous for its confronting load screens.



positive outcome. The studio responsible for its creation, Newgaming, were inundated with threats after the game's release. And with comments like 'this is not a game- you can't win and you can't lose', along with the obvious guts required of the team to tackle such a sensitive issue, is it hardly surprising?

Delving further in to the mucky pool of morality, Molleindustria are a studio that knows all about toying with people's sense of right and wrong. One such title is Unmanned, a virtual droid simulator that explores the ethical conundrum of the real damage inflicted during war by drawing parallels between soldier and enemy. Unmanned droids may be a convenient way to get the hard jobs done whilst keeping fighters far from the actual battle line, but does this really eliminates the sense of guilt and anxiety that comes with killing people for a living? Can one really ever switch off from this kind of job?

Triple A shooters aren't exactly known for their deep and subversive cultural commentary. Run around, shoot the bad guys, try not to get shot- we all know

the drill. However, in 2012 Yager Development shocked us all by releasing what was essentially a statement on not only war, but the entire FPS genre. Spec Ops: The Line initially seems like your average run-of-the-mill wartime shooter (can you tell I'm not the biggest fan of the genre?). But as the storyline progresses, it becomes almost uncomfortably apparent that this is one title that goes much deeper. With progressively confronting loading screens that pose questions like 'do you feel like a hero yet?' the undeniable lack of black-and-white rationale in the face of war is shown through continuous blurring of the player's moral compass. In an industry which almost relies on the unquestioned glorification of war and violence in order to sustain itself, Spec Ops: The Line is a refreshing change of pace. The narrative entirely subverted expectations for a game of this field- a brave step for a triple A title.

On the same line of thought regarding soldiers, violence and autonomous decision making, I could mention Bioshock here.... but I think that one's been explored enough for this lifetime. Plus, you know, spoilers and all that.

Back on to the indie titles, the critically acclaimed Papers, Please is a dark comment on immigration and corruption within the system, reminding us all that that system is manned by people- people who can be bribed, blackmailed and charmed. As an immigration officer at the newly-opened border of the fictitious and vaguely Eastern European nation of Republica, you must process an overwhelming and often tedious amount of visas in a time of overwhelming political unrest and discord. Will you stick to the system and keep the cogs turning as the powers that be dictate, or will you follow your moral (or financially greedy) compass? Will either of these choices pay off?

By now, you may be wondering when the hell games got so serious. Didn't it all used to be about shooting rocks in space and little amphibious critters jumping over stuff? What the hell happened? Games as art happened, my friend. I know, it's a little overwhelming. Maybe you need to unwind and play something harmless... like Fez. Or Sonic. Something fun and light-hearted, and free from dark, political overtones and guilt trips.