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Polymorphous pixels: British academic ponders nature of video games

Tom Baker / Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

What do we talk about when we talk about video games? Iain Simons, who talks and writes about them for a living, says that one important thing to keep in mind is that "game" should not be used as a "catch-all term," especially by those who wish to dismiss the ever-expanding new medium.

Simons, the director of the GameCity Festival at Nottingham Trent University in Britain, told The Daily Yomiuri by telephone last week: "It surely can't be the case that we would talk about a game on your mobile phone in necessarily the same way, critically, that we would talk about Shadow of the Colossus."

Indeed, at least some cell phone games might be described as advanced thumb-twiddling--and there's nothing wrong with that--but the 2005 Sony PlayStation 2 game Simons mentioned (Japan title: Wanda to Kyozo) starts out as routine monster-slaying escapism only to evolve into something that subtly yet powerfully raises serious philosophical questions.

If you haven't yet played that game and think you might like to, be warned--mild spoilers will appear further down in this article.

Not only do video games call for varied levels of mental engagement, but the question of what a game is becomes harder to answer as platforms and contexts become increasingly diverse.

Together with Bath Spa University Senior Lecturer James Newman, Simons has written a book called 100 Videogames (British Film Institute, 261 pp, 12 pounds) that gives an idea of how many meanings the term "video game" can have.

In their book's introduction, Simons and Newman stress that they were not out to compile a best-of list so much as to comment on titles that "reveal something fascinating about the nature of videogames as a form, whether structurally as in the case of Super Mario Brothers, aesthetically as in the case of Killer 7, or in terms of the relationship between interactivity and narrative as is the case with Half-Life 2 and Fahrenheit."

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Not all of the authors' reviews are positive. Of the "interactive film" Fahrenheit (2005), they bluntly declare: "This isn't any fun."

While covering such early classics as Pong (1972), Space Invaders (1979) and Asteroids (1979), the book credits Pac-Man (1980) for doing "much to break the comparative stranglehold that space shooting had on game design."

Nowadays nothing seems to have a stranglehold on game design, as games have required players to reproduce musical beats (PaRappa the Rapper, 1996), sing (Singstar, 2004) and compose their own transient works of musical-visual art (Electroplankton, 2005). Games have even been based on urban planning (Sim City, 1989) and agriculture (Harvest Moon, 1997). And of course there are the oft maligned first-person shooter games, such as Manhunt (2003).

Nintendo's Wii game device, which translates players' physical movements into onscreen action--incidentally getting them up off the sofa--debuted just a little too late to be included, but Simons acknowledged, "Wii Sports would have been in the book if we had played it [in time]."

"For me, the most interesting platform is the [Nintendo] DS," he said, citing WarioWare, Inc: Mega Microgames (2003) as an example of the handheld device's capabilities. "You're just kind of torpedoed through these crazy, brilliant chores," each one a game lasting 15 seconds or less, requiring players to blow into the DS, spin it, stroke it and so on.

Aside from an obvious enthusiasm for the subject, why did Simons cowrite 100 Videogames?

"If I wasn't interested in videogames and I was a parent--which I now am--I probably wouldn't know where to go to begin to find out what they had to offer," Simons said. "And the irony is that they do have a huge amount to offer. But I think the problem is the games industry is just very poor at describing its strengths. I think it's been so focused on defense--because it gets attacked so much, so that's kind of forgivable--but there's this kind of paranoid posturing that it gets into which renders it unable to talk about the things that are interesting."

"People don't know what Grand Theft Auto is," he continued. "They've kind of heard about it, and they know it's maybe a bit like The Sopranos or something. But I don't think most parents have actually seen it, and they don't understand, necessarily, what a Wii is [either]...There's a whole bunch of really pragmatic, basic questions that aren't getting answered before we even get into whether violent games will cause my children to be sociopaths or whatever."

On the subject of violence in video games, Simons said: "I suspect violence and just blowing [things] up is always going to be a key part of video games--as it is cinema, and as it is a whole bunch of our culture."

People, males in particular, plainly enjoy "the pleasure of seeing a block of flats demolished, the kind of basic pleasure of smashing stuff up," he said.

"Video games, coming from the very specifically male place that they did, are obviously going to have more of that."

He concluded that violence is fine in an entertainment medium, as long as that's not all there is to it--and video games have much more than that to offer.

However, those who see video games as harmful argue that in a violent movie you can watch characters being shot, while in a violent video game you can purposely shoot them yourself.

"They're completely different things," Simons agreed, but he turned the argument around with the example of *Shadow of the Colossus*, which the book praises for "emotional intensity."

"*Shadow of the Colossus* is particularly kind of moving because you're doing these things [killing giant beasts], and it is gradually revealed to you that maybe you're not doing the right thing," he said. "Maybe what you're doing is evil. And the way that is slowly unveiled over the game is just fantastic. But if you weren't doing that [yourself, as opposed to passively watching the action], then that would have no purchase. It's important that it is you doing it. We have to take responsibility for the things that we do."

The game can actually induce feelings of guilt in its players, Simons said.

That's an emotion that probably would have been alien to anyone gleefully blowing up crablike space invaders back in 1979--and it shows that there is a more than ever to talk about when talking about video games.

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