

Playing for Columbine. Empathetic gaming in “Super Columbine Massacre RPG!”

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On 20 April 2005, on the sixth year anniversary of the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado, Daniel Ledonne uploaded his self-made computer game about the tragedy onto the web. *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* asks the player to re-enact the atrocities of 20 April 1999 from the point of view of the shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Socially ostracised and consumed with apocalyptic hatred and rage, Harris and Klebold killed 12 students and one teacher in their own school, Columbine High, before they committed a bloody suicide in the school’s library. Their arsenal of weapons, loaded in duffel bags and tucked under their black trench coats, included two sawn-off shotguns, a carbine rifle, a Tech-9 semi-automatic handgun, a variety of knives, 48 carbon dioxide bombs, 27 pipe bombs, 11 1.5 gallon propane bombs, two 20 pound propane bombs, and 7 gas or napalm bombs. In Ledonne’s game, which faithfully reconstructs this arsenal for the player, each successful kill is congratulated with the words “Another victory for the Trench Coat Mafia!”

Super Columbine Massacre RPG! (SCMRPG) brands itself as a piece of critical social commentary, a game with a message. In a much-quoted interview with Washington Post from May 2006, Danny Ledonne states that he made the game as an “indictment of our society at large”. He says that he too was “a misfit,” “a loner” and “a bullied kid” in high school, much like Harris and Klebold were¹. The game’s official website at www.columbinegame.com includes a statement from Ledonne about his motivations and intentions, a discussion forum that has currently around 6500 posts, and a promotional trailer that quotes some of the different responses the game has provoked.

After being picked up by game designer and researcher Ian Bogost on the Watercooler Games blog in May 2006, the game has generated much debate and analysis, most of which is available online. The controversy was re-fuelled by the organisers of the Slamdance

¹ See Vargas (2006).

independent film festival in Park City, who originally included SCMRPG among the finalists in the 2007 Guerrilla Game Maker Competition and then withdrew its nomination for ethical and legal reasons. As a result, seven other finalists pulled out of the competition in protest, the competition dissolved, and no awards were given out.

In this article I want to take a closer look at the defining design principles and aesthetic strategies of SCMRPG, and consider its value and relevance as a critical artistic expression. I will also ask what this particular game may have to teach us about the strengths and limitations of computer games as a politically potent art form, and as a vehicle for social commentary.

The problem of empathetic gaming

Super Columbine Massacre RPG! is a difficult game to come to grips with. It re-stages the atrocities for the player to empathetically enact, and even to embody to a certain degree, from the point of view of the shooters, in the style of a classical role-playing video game, as if it was all taking place in a playful Nintendo world. There is a striking contrast between the video game world – and the kind of attitude and emotions this world invites on behalf of the player – and the reality and immediacy of the real-life tragedy that is forced into this generic framework.

Artistically, this is a self-reflexive strategy; the player is asked to role play Harris and Klebold as formulaic game heroes. Computer games are central in youth culture as well in popular culture more generally, and using computer game aesthetics to interpret a high school shooting seems, therefore, like a natural fit. In particular the notoriously famous *Doom* (id Software 1993), which spearheaded the genre of the First Person Shooter, allegedly played a central role in the young shooters lives, and the role of violent computer games has become one of the central issues in the public consciousness of Columbine and similar shootings. In this respect, SCMRPG can be compared Gus van Sant's film *Elephant* (2003), which also reflects video game form in its way of structuring space and narrative².

² This similarity is mainly due to *Elephant*'s use of prolonged steadicam tracking shots as the dominant way of describing characters and events. The opening drunk-driving sequence is particularly illustrative, approaching an exact cinematic re-construction of a typical driving sequence from *Grand Theft Auto III* (DMA Design 2001).

One of the strongest criticisms against *Elephant* has been that the film's purely descriptive approach, along with its complete lack of any context that could hint at some possible explanation of the events, is irresponsible and desensitizing. *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* has been met with a similar kind of rejection, however focussing more specifically on the interactive nature of empathetic participation:

“While some may argue that the game is actually enlightening because it lets outsiders see the emotions and logic behind the killers' motives, it does not make up for the fact that, with a click of the mouse, a person can kill pixilated versions of the real victims involved that day. This game laughs in the faces of the friends and families of victims killed that day and utterly disrespects anyone who may have been in any way affected by the incident”. Editorial at Collegiatetimes.com (2006).

This criticism points to the ethical concerns raised by a game like SCMRPG. When staging a make-believe reconstruction in which the participant is in fact invited to shoot and kill 'versions of the real victims', there is a responsibility to the seriousness of the events and to the people affected; one must be prepared to explain why and how the artistic enterprise is worth it, in spite of the costs. This responsibility is partly on the part of the player – a game can be played in a number of ways, with a number of different attitudes and motivations – but it is also a responsibility on the part of the game designer, who must create a space for meaningful interaction and interpretation that encourages rather than discourages or obstructs the player's ethical awareness and reflection.

Several critics and commentators find that SCMRPG does indeed create such a space, and that the game deserves attention as a video game that demonstrates and expands the artistic and critical potential of the medium.

Interactivity is one of the core features that differentiate games from passive media like film. In a game we play a role. Most of the time, the roles we play in games are roles of power. Space marine, world-class footballer or hero plumber. Isn't it about time we played the role of the weak, the misunderstood, even the evil? If videogames remain places where we only exercise juvenile power fantasies, I'm not sure there will be a meaningful future for the medium. (...) No topic is off-limits to art of any kind. We must not be afraid to try to understand our world, even if such

progress seems difficult or dangerous. Clearly there are more and less meaningful ways to simulate any topic. But no subject is a priori off limits.

– Ian Bogost in interview with Eurogamer. (Parkin 2006).

The great strength of games as a medium, the one thing games are able to do that other media cannot, is to illuminate their subject by engaging the player directly in the action. Other media can depict, but they can't bring you inside.

– Greg Costikyan on Man!fiesto Games blog. (Costikyan 2007).

These comments point to two central challenges facing a game like SCMRPG:

First, the mechanisms of empathetic participation. Like *Elephant*, the videogame reconstruction of the Columbine tragedy calls attention to the difficult relationship between empathy and complicity. In what way exactly are you as a player 'brought inside' the events from the point of view of the shooters, and why? This has to do with the nature of the simulation, and it is also a question of genre; different types of computer games differ quite radically from each other in terms of how they simulate worlds and events. Has SCMRPG found, in Bogost's terms above, a meaningful generic way to simulate the Columbine shootings, and a meaningful way for us to engage with and perform its simulation?

Secondly, the gaming part. SCMRPG is more than an empathetic simulation. Unlike many other computer games with a message, it does present an actual challenge and an actual struggle. This means that we must also ask what – if anything – this aspect brings to the artistic project, and to the social critique. Does Ledonne's game advance videogames as an art form beyond the domain of game-like simulations? Does it demonstrate, in Costikyan's words above, the strength of games as a medium? Whereas its general exploitative potential as a piece of violent and forbidden entertainment will be, after all, comparatively limited, due to its graphical simplicity and content-heavy design, the goals and pleasures of the game *qua* game still threatens to create an unbridgeable gap between the nature of participation and the reality of the event. In the particular case of SCMRPG, therefore, we may re-phrase Ian Bogost's comment above: are there certain types of subjects that are off-limits to competitive engagement? Can real gaming combine with the working through of real tragedy? In the following I will approach this question indirectly, by first taking a closer look at what kind of role playing *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* offers.

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