

These games really push our buttons

Creators of controversial games call them art. But detractors aren't so sure



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Danny Ledonne has been called a “disgusting and sick individual,” a “monster” and the “Antichrist.” The press has grilled him for three years running. His life has been threatened multiple times.

Ledonne’s offense? He made a video game.

Granted, the 26-year-old from Colorado created one of the most controversial video games of all time. No, I’m not talking about one of the “Grand Theft Auto” sequels. I’m talking about “[Super Columbine Massacre RPG!](#)” — a free computer game that lets players step into the black boots of the two teens who gunned down dozens of their fellow students at Columbine High School.



"If only we would have searched their room .
If only we would have asked the right questions."

Danny Ledonne

Released on the sixth anniversary of the massacre, the game presents players with a low-res gaming experience that uses material culled from Eric Harris' and Dylan Klebold's own words, media reports and police documents.

“‘Super Columbine’ allows players to confront the last days of these two profoundly misunderstood, angry boys through their own writing, their own testimonies and gives the player the chance to understand what it might have been like in their own heads,” Ledonne explains. “This game was intended to be a jumping off point for a larger discussion.”

But many people have taken serious issue with the game. Though the tragedy at Columbine High School occurred nearly 10 years ago, that day remains raw in the minds of many.

“You don’t gain appreciation for the tragedy by repeating it and participating in a recreation yourself and taking the role of murderers,” says Tim Winter, president of the Parents Television Council, in an interview for a documentary film Ledonne recently completed about his experiences making the game, and the aftermath.

The film — which is called "Playing Columbine" and is now making its way around the festival circuit — includes interviews with the game's defenders and detractors as well as with school shooting survivors. The documentary presents Ledonne's argument for making his game and other games that explore troubling topics and explores the role controversial games play in our culture as well as the debate over their value.

“‘Super Columbine Massacre’ isn’t the only game pushing people’s buttons. As game developers strive to grow video and computer games into a medium that offers more than just kid-friendly entertainment, an increasing number of games are shoving at our comfort zones far more than “GTA” could ever dream of.

From a game about a Jewish child’s escape from the Nazis, to a game about the Catholic church’s cover up of pedophilia among its priest, to a game that puts players in the shoes of a terrorist trying to kill President Bush, these games- often created by independent developers working outside the mainstream industry — ask hard questions, portray disturbing viewpoints and offer up gaming experiences that some people feel no one should ever experience at all.

“This is totally immoral and should be banned to everyone, especially younger teenagers,” wrote a reader calling herself Ms. Johnson in response to my recent column about “The Torture Game 2,” a controversial Web game that allows players to torture a man-like person tied up with ropes.

But while some suggest that provocative and disturbing games have no business existing *period*, others believe that without games that push our boundaries and challenge our sensibilities, gaming as a whole will never evolve.

“I’ll risk saying it: these are the types of games that truly elevate the medium,” wrote Steve Watts, a 26-year-old games enthusiast from Baltimore. “Those outside the gaming culture may not realize it, but games as a whole are taking a cultural shift right now, fighting between being ‘art’ and ‘entertainment’ ... I think it’s only right to point out that some of the greatest art in the world is daring and tests boundaries.”

Playing Columbine

Ledonne, who grew up in Colorado, was a high school sophomore in 1999 when Harris and Klebold walked through Columbine High, gunning down students and teachers. The massacre had a profound impact on the kid who, not unlike the killers, was a loner and bullied by other students.



Danny Ledonne

“I was looking at these two boys who I saw perhaps too much of myself in,” Ledonne says in the documentary. “To be honest with you, I was headed down something of a similar path.”

Years later, Ledonne — a film student fascinated by the way movies have the ability to inspire public discourse — decided to make a game about Columbine. He said it was his way

of exploring this landmark tragedy, and an especially intriguing one since games like “Doom” had been blamed for the shooting.

After spending months researching the massacre, he launched “Super Columbine” as a free download on the Internet and, in doing so, launched a controversy. Some called Ledonne’s game a slap in the face to the families of those killed and an exploitive and unnecessary piece of violent entertainment. Others hailed it as sophisticated fusion of gameplay and documentary filmmaking and a ground-breaking achievement in artistic game design. Even those personally affected by the massacre weighed in with differing points of view.

But the controversy didn’t end there. “Playing Columbine” takes a look at what happened when “Super Columbine Massacre RPG!” was implicated as an inspiration for a shooting in Montreal. The film also explores what happened when the Slamdance Festival- whose aim is to support edgier artists than Sundance - removed the game from its "Guerilla Gamemaker Competition" last year. (More than half of the festival’s developers pulled their games to protest the censorship).

Should games tackle touchy subjects?

As the film explores the ins and outs and ups and downs of making a game that treads on touchy territory, what Ledonne finds is that while movies, books, and even paintings are free to explore difficult topics, video games remain confined to something of a good-time ghetto — that is, it’s all fine and dandy if a game asks players to merrily save princesses or battle giant cartoon apes, but for some it’s inconceivable that something called a “game” should tackle controversial topics and provoke real debate.

“The controversy should be that there aren’t more games like ‘Super Columbine Massacre RPG!’ that are as demanding and as artistically innovative,” David Kociemba, an art professor Emerson College, says in the documentary.

“Why is it permitted for Michael Moore in 2002, to make ‘Bowling For Columbine’ — a film essay on this subject — and to use far more graphic footage than Danny Ledonne does three years later in a primitive low-res video game? Are we really going to say that video game designers are the one set of artists that do not have the right to engage in contemporary political issues?”

But New York state senator Andrew Lanza questions the ability of games to explore such topics. "The question is, can you take real life tragedies and somehow turn them into educational games. You know, I'm sure it's possible, but I think it's difficult."

Testing...testing

Despite the resistance developers encounter when making games that tread on taboo territory, there's a growing number of games out there that provoke both ire and insight.



Wafaa Bilal

"Virtual Jihadi" puts players in the role of a suicide bomber tasked with killing President Bush. Critics accused game-maker Wafaa Bilal with promoting terrorism. Bilal counters that he was trying to raise awareness about the civilian toll of the war in Iraq.

Wafaa Bilal, an Iraqi-born-Chicago-based artist, was recently accused of promoting terrorism when he began showing his game "Virtual Jihadi" at art galleries. The game puts players in the role of a suicide bomber tasked with killing President Bush. But Bilal insists instead that he wanted to raise awareness about the civilian toll in Iraq and show that many Iraqis "have been forced by the consequences of the invasion to become suicide bombers."

The Italian developers at La Molleindustria have taken a jab at the Catholic Church's handling of the molestation scandals with "Operation: Pedopriest," a game that puts players in the role of a Vatican task force charged with covering up for priests with a penchant for pedophilia.

7 games that will push your buttons and boundaries

While some would prefer it if video games remained light-hearted entertainment suitable for the whole family, some believe games can and should push us to investigate darker and more disturbing topics.

From child molestations to the Holocaust to religious intolerance, some provocative developers are using games to explore taboo topics, troubling times and the blackest reaches of mankind's black little heart.

Here's a look at some of the games that forgo lighter fare in favor of pushing players' comfort zones. While these digital creations may be disturbing, offensive and even a little bit scary, their creators argue that they also have something important to say about the real world around us.

-- Winda Benedetti

- **'Super Columbine Massacre RPG!'**



Danny Ledonne

This highly controversial role-playing game plays out like a cross between a game and a documentary film.

Created by filmmaker Danny Ledonne, it puts players into the mindset of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold by allowing them to role-play as the two teens on the day they walked through Columbine High School, gunning down students and teachers. Mixed into the gameplay are real images from the boys' lives and the shooting, and excerpts from the killers' own writings.

This polarizing game has inspired years of debate, with some praising it as a thoughtful achievement in artistic game-making and others condemning it as an exploitive punch in the gut to the families of those killed.

'JFK: Reloaded'



Traffic Games

Created by Scottish company Traffic Games, "JFK: Reloaded" stirred up plenty of controversy when it launched in 2004 on the 41st anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination. The game, which plays out like a first-person shooter, puts players in the Texas Schoolbook Depository and in the shoes of Lee Harvey Oswald and then challenges them to try to shoot the president as his motorcade drives by.

While some called the game a "useful tool" for better understanding a historical event, others call it "nauseating" and the Kennedy family called it "despicable."

- 'Operation: Pedopriest'



Molleindustria

The game developers and artists at Molleindustria say they want to "free videogames from the dictatorship of entertainment, using them instead to describe pressing social needs, and to express our feelings or ideas just as we do in other forms of art."

With that in mind, they created "Operation: Pedopriest" to express their outrage over the Catholic Church's handling of priests who molest children. The game asks players to control a Vatican task force that protects priests as they attack children by intimidating parents and witnesses.

The game is unsettling, outrageous and, many say, offensive. But the game makers say they wanted to provoke discussion and debate about an issue they find even more unsettling, outrageous and offensive.

- **'Faith Fighter'**



Molleindustria

With "Faith Fighter," the Molleindustria folks use a healthy dose of humor to illustrate the problem of religious intolerance. Here players control various deities, from Jesus to Buddha to even Mohammad and have them engage in cartoonish fisticuffs a la "Mortal Kombat." (Check out "Bible Fight" as well for another fighting game of biblical proportions.)

'Harpooned: Japanese Cetacean Research Simulator'



Conor O'Kane

"Right from the start I knew it was important that the game not be preachy," says Conor O'Kane, the Australian creator of the disturbing-yet-fun whale-hunting game "Harpooned." "I didn't want to tell people what to think; rather I wanted to encourage them to think for themselves."

O'Kane's shooting game tasks players with gunning down defenseless whales in Antarctica, transforming them into dog food and whaleburgers as you go. Shoot the whales and their guts blossom in the water. While it's both gross and sad, O'Kane said he wanted to use satire to illuminate a real-world problem - the mass slaughter of whales by the Japanese under the guise of "research."

- **'September 12th'**



Newsgaming

The starting screen greets you with this: "This is not a game. You can't win and you can't lose. It has no ending. It has already begun."

Newsgaming offers up its take on the War on Terror with a simple little game called "September 12th." You're given free reign to send missiles into an Afghani Village. But as you destroy buildings and kill civilians, you see that your actions have consequences - the more you fire on the people, the more terrorists you create.

- **'Imagination Is The Only Escape'**



Luc Bernard

An immediate outcry erupted when artist Luc Bernard announced he was working on a video game about a child's experience during the Holocaust. Many insisted that a game could not and should not explore such a serious topic.

But Bernard disagrees. He says that while the games business is full of violent WWII shooting games that have little to do with the realities of war, his game will be a more thoughtful and realistic look at the true horrors of that conflict.

"I think this will be the saddest videogame ever made," he said.

At this writing, "Imagination" is in the early stages of development, and Bernard says he's working with Holocaust survivors and is winning their support.