

1.

“The power of popularity”



“...groups have never thirsted after truth. They demand illusions, and cannot do without them. They constantly give what is unreal precedence over what is real; they are almost as strongly influenced by what is untrue as by what is true. They have an evident tendency not to distinguish between the two” - Gustave Le Bon, “The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind” (1895)

As a species, human beings are one that crave community. Evolutionarily, the human species are ill equipped to compete on a physical level with other predatory animals. We were able to rise to the top of the food chain partially because of our ability to adapt quickly to our surroundings and use tools to bend nature to our will. While this was a huge boon to our species, it can also be a weakness if manipulated or distorted. The genetic residual of struggles past has been left behind in our lower level thinking (*brainstem*): Where our survival instincts of self preservation (*impulses to reproduce, protect ourselves from predators, and to adapt to our surroundings*) are governed.

It is typically no-secret amongst the advertizing sector what great power there lies in what Orwell coined “Groupthink”. In his 1928 book “Propaganda”, Edward Bernays (*the father of Public Relations, and advertizing guru of his time*), drew upon the study of group psychology to posit that it was the proper role of the modern Democratic mixed-economy to use these mechanisms as a means of controlling what he saw as a chaotic (*thus out of control*), free-thinking public.

(Note: Bernays was working for the dark side, so he argues in favor of mass psychology being used to subvert the individual’s reasoning. With unashamed brazen elitism, Bernays lays his poker hand on the table face up, and synthesizes group psychology into a modern “Democratic” framework.)

“The systematic study of mass psychology revealed to students the potentialities of invisible government of society by manipulation of the motives which actuate man in the group. Trotter and Le Bon, who approached the subject in a scientific manner, and Graham Wallas, Walter Lippmann and others who continued with searching studies of the group mind, established that the group has mental characteristics distinct from those of the individual, and is motivated by impulses and emotions which cannot be explained on the basis of what we know of individual psychology. So the question naturally arose: If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it?”

-Edward Bernays - “Propaganda” (1928)

One may think the manipulation of the individual’s ego through group dynamics is a modern phenomena, but these same manipulative practices seem to stem from earlier periods, namely through that of religious orthodoxy. Through dogmatic religious laws, rituals and traditions, even when seemingly trivial, the group mind is ever reinforced in order to gain compliance in denial of the individual will.

Many religious doctrines use ritual extensively. Whether this be the taking of communion or the symbolism inherent in festivals or holidays. Through the use of simultaneous acting in a shared experience, it gets people thinking in terms of themselves as a cell within a larger organism, thus making dissent against it much less likley, while viewing those outside of it’s common experience as dangerous.

In reinforcing gender norms as strictly regimented dogma, religion can further subvert the individual will as it narrows the defenition of self in it’s adherents. Deviance from those norms is seen as a threat, and is stamped out, more for what it threatens to subvert in regards to upsetting the group dynamics of that religion than any actual moral concern. Once deviance arises, the individual begins to question, and the power of the group is diminished. (*“Here is what masculinity does, and here is what femininity does. . . and that’s it.”*)

In it’s strictest form, religious institutions also seek to regulate the outward appearance of the individual, to ensure sameness (*Militaries and prisons also use this tactic, to strip the individual of their ego via normalizing appearances into one singular organism*). Tying in to gender norms, this uniform seeks to quite literally enforce them aesthetically: Artificially providing ‘proof’ that the ways of the religious group are the natural state of things. (*“Here is what masculinity looks like, and here is what femininity looks like. . . and that’s it.”*)

“Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”

-Ephesians 5:24

Even though increased secularism is the overriding social trend in 21st century society, the residual ghost of religious orthodoxy remains in how our cultural identities were formed. Our perceptions of normalcy in areas such as gender or vice have deep roots in the puritanical traditions. For example, sexuality and the human body are still considered degrading and taboo: A throwback to the Garden of Eden myth, where Adam and Eve found their nakedness to be shameful. People tend to fetishize what they see as taboo. In cultures where nudity and sexuality are more culturally normalized, you find much more of a reasonable reaction toward the human form, and I would argue, much more of a respect for that form (*and who is connected to it*). In ours (*a country which cannot figure out if we are a secular state or a de facto theocracy*), we find a literal obsession with nakedness, where the mere viewing of these parts sends people into a frenzy (*for or against*).

In gaming, I find this to manifest in the extreme on either end of the spectrum. On one hand, we find the use of the female form (*unsurprisingly*) used as a cheap gimmick, to draw in young male players with the promise

that the forbidden fruits will be at the ready. On the other hand, the moral crusaders of old have cloaked themselves in the guise of liberty by claiming that purely through the use of extreme modesty, only then the female of the species can be properly respected (*presumably while the male of the species fully expresses their sexual desires uninhibited -Slut Shaming, so to speak*). This insinuates that the female form is something with an inherent disrespectability or weakness. I find both to be an unhealthy manifestation of a puritanical past, where femininity itself is portrayed as the source of all vice (sin) and thought to be something that should be kept confined or hidden, lest its very appearance usher in the downfall of all known civilization.

2.

To contrast the difference between a scholarly article and a trade periodical is something of a matter of purpose and audience. While the scholarly article is written purposefully to occult its meaning from the Great Unwashed Masses, in favor of those with the “proper training to understand this shit.” A trade periodical is meant to promote its subject to a greater general audience. Pretense would be counter intuitive to that end, and so it is often avoided. The scholarly writing often positions itself as “above it all”, unbiased, as if insulated from the animalistic passions seen as unsightly and irrespectable in polite company, while the trades seek to provide more of a sensory experience to purposefully arouse those passions. Similar to legalease, the academic articles contained finely tuned academiaease (Scholarease? Intelligenciaease?), the trades find this to be far too exclusionary for communicating to their audience, so it is often avoided. The academic article writes about popular culture without being popular culture. If the trades aren't culture, they seek to immitate it.

To balance (*I actually do enjoy reading scholarly articles, though it's also a bit of fun to rip them apart in an attempt to keep the mood light*). Scholarly articles on the topics of popular culture tend to put themselves in a position to deeply analyze the subject in a context outside of that culture. Given earlier reference to the power of popularity, it can sometimes tend to act without thoughtfulness or broader context. The fact that a scholarly article is removed emotionally perhaps also distances itself from the social blinders.

3.

The quote in question regards the infamous and ongoing GamerGate controversy. The author argues that gaming culture, while changing to be more inclusive, has a strong resistance to those changes in what proponents deem to be progressive politics and political correctness infiltrating game culture. The author mentions that this is an important conversation that needs to be had. This, I agree with. If there are people who are made to feel like they are not represented by a subculture, it is certainly proper to have a public discourse about it. The problem with the GamerGate controversy in general, however, is that we find two ideological opposites, extremes if you will, going head to head.

On one side, you have 4chan. . . Yes. . . 4chan. In the halls of internet lore, 4chan has a notorious reputation for the most extreme of trolling, even that which devolves into the realm of criminality and extreme harrassment: GamerGate was no exception. Harrassment, doxing, rape threats and death threats were the modus operandi. This is far from 4chan's first forray into wretchedness. The recent Oregon school shooter (*whom I will not name, out of respect for his victims*), for example, posted his plans on 4chan ahead of time, to cheers and encouragement, even some suggestions to try during the process (some of which, he did). When there was a major hack of celebrities' private cloud accounts, in which nude photos were involuntarily published on the internet (The Fappening), it was posted on 4chan (a gross violation of the self ownership the victims have over their own bodies). The latest development of the GamerGate story actually revolves around the recent terrorist attacks in paris. A Canadian game journalist (*who happens to be opposed to GamerGate and started the #stopgamergate2014 hashtag*), a Sikh -who wears a Sikh Turban, was recently photoshopped with a Koran and a 'suicide vest' onto one of his social media selfies and circulated into the press as a photo of one of the terrorist

attackers. This photoshopped picture was picked up by several news sources as one of the terrorists preparing for the attack.

Original Selfie



Altered Image



Media ran with it:

sky TG24 SEZIONI BLOG FATTO TV ABBONATI FQ SHOP FQ RADIO

[The #Isis sent a picture of the alleged #kamikaze.]

Attentati Parigi, "ecco uno dei terroristi". L'Isis invia foto di un presunto kamikaze senza nome

Milano
di F. G. | 14 novembre 2015

COMMENTI (3)

Twitter +1

Più informazioni su: Attentato Parigi, Isis, Parigi

LA INVESTIGACIÓN
Uno de los terroristas pudo entrar por Grecia entre los refugiados sirios. Los atacantes identificados tenían entre 15 y 18 años y actuaron en tres equipos

LAS VÍCTIMAS
El español Alberto González, de 29 años, entre los asesinados en la sala Bataclan

Uno de los terroristas
El joven español

LA RAZA

DIARIO INDEPENDIENTE DE INFORMACIÓN GENERAL

Es la guerra

The sordid people of 4chan, purporting to be in support of “honesty in journalism” seems to be nothing more than the most extreme of trolls and cyber criminals, indefensible as they are unscrupulous. No proper discourse could be had with such people.

On the other side, you have an argument that also starts to move away from having a dialogue, which I personally believe needs to be taking place. Instead, it’s argued in favor of the notion that content ought to be policed (*censored*) as found in the following sentence: “Developers need to start moving away from the entitled macho-male power fantasy in their games.” This strikes me as another extreme (*though far short of the blatant criminality and disregard for decency coming from the GamerGate side*).

Going back to Edward Bernays’ theories of group dynamics: Could it be argued that the reason “sex sells” is because it activates our primitive impulse to breed? Someone who is in more of a suggestible state, when presented with a subconscious symbol of fertility, may buy on impulse rather than by informed decision making. Toward the male audience, the “power fantasy” and use of scantily clad women, may play into the subconscious insecurities of the average male. It suggests: “If you buy this product, you too may breed with these fertile females, and your fantastolastic genes will be passed on into the future.

To scapegoat games *specifically* as an evil, when these themes of sexism and other tropes are rampant in culture at large seems unfair. Every theme that I have seen in games also has parallels in time tested mediums of cultural expression. I must add, the worst themes present in games do no more than match the brutality of the human species in the flesh.

Regardless of one’s personal views, it’s often the speech that is deemed by society to be the most distasteful and/or controversial that needs the most protection from censors as free speech. Truth be told, I don’t tend to fit well with the Alpha Machismo Brohood: The typical pressure upon men in this culture to aspire to. With that said, I’d be lying if I said I don’t enjoy a good violent video game from time to time, even when they border on the socially unacceptable. It’s simply satisfying sometimes to enact virtual rage on an imaginary world. Within those valuable experiences, expiating the frustrations of everyday life into a virtual realm (a bit like screaming into a pillow), I seek to deprive no-one of their own cultural experiences.

I would argue that these aesthetics may not be relevant to all people, and that’s ok. The simple fact is that there are people, perfectly reasonable people, who quite enjoy games that could be construed as an asshole macho-fest, as much as some people may prefer a “torture porn” gore flick (*like Saw, or Passion of the Christ*), or an action movie featuring the former Governor of California. What large problem that I tend to hear from people are regarding the users of some of the online social game services that are quite popular. It’s typical to find racist, homophobic and sexist language, harassment and abuse hurled from the safety of a computer chair. Similar to the keyboard commando (*possibly a 4chan troll?*), it would seem that outrage and chaos were the specific intention, not even knowing whether the words being spoken(or written) are done to simply provoke a response or are a part of a larger philosophy being crudely espoused.

To appropriate a bumper sticker cliché: Games don’t hurt people, people hurt people. To take that further: Games aren’t assholes: People are assholes.

The following is a handy guide to what is socially acceptable in American society:

... and why video games are *clearly* destroying our 'morally upright' society.

Video game: Bad

Sexy Cop - Grand Theft Auto San Andreas



TV show: Good

Officer Monica Harper - Pacific Blue



Video game: Evil

Hot Coffee - Grand Theft Auto San Andreas



Jeans: Good

Justin Beiber - Calvin Klein Ad

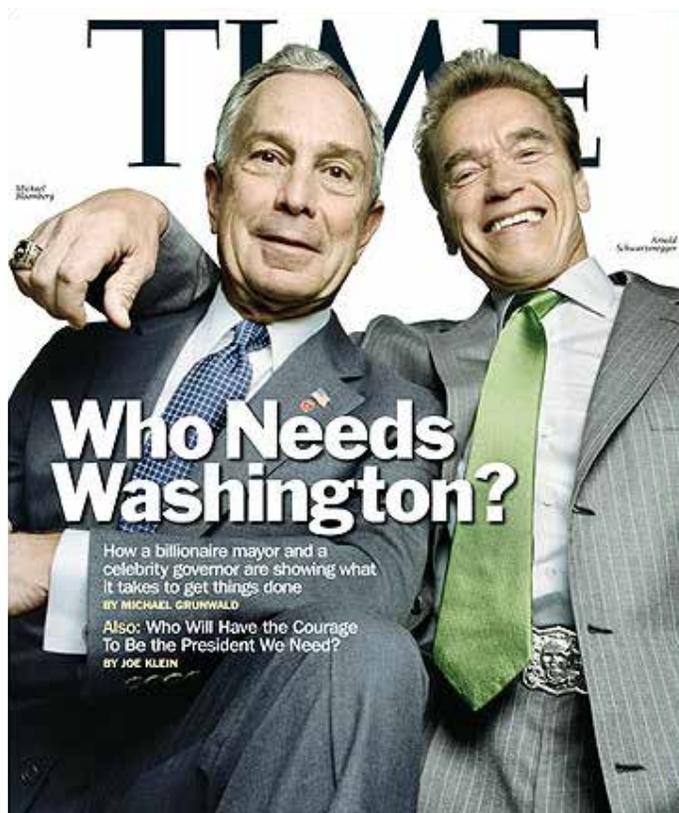


Video game: Menace
Duke Nukem



Politician: Messiah

Arnold Schwarzenegger - Former Governor



Video game: Very Bad
Far Cry 5



Movie Star: Very Niiice!
Borat



ummm . . . Sorry . . . couldn't resist.

Video game: **Risque**
Cortana - Halo



Painting: **Sacred**

The Birth of Venus - William-Adolphe Bouguereau



4.

Collectivism vs. Individualism

To properly express my reasoning, I believe I must first stress that I am an individualist rather than a collectivist (*suprise, suprise. I know*). I don't personally believe that there is a one-size fits all, centralized, top-down solution to any issue, any more than humanity is a singular monotone entity that drones in unison as one organism.

It is true that people are shaped by the cultural identity or social tribe to which they belong. However, it is within that (*macro*) construct that individuals develop their reaction to social identity: Based on their (*micro*) surroundings and personal experiences. The existence of individual autonomy disproves the validity of concepts such as racism or sexism and annihilates the supposed wisdom of Othering people in general. Humans are tribal, yet fiercely individual at the same time. If it were true that humans were purely collective, there would be no rebels, and no deviants. Culture would remain frozen in time: The thought of anything outside of that externally imposed identity would be conceivably impossible.

Pure collectivism has the consequence of denying individuals the sanctity of their own thoughts, choices, or sensibilities for the sake of a larger archetype which is hoisted upon them from external sources. They are, in such a system of being, defined by others and thus disallowed to express what is important to them from their own lives, and their own perspectives.

So, in reaction to the concept of masculinity being the measure of empowerment, I argue in stark rejection of such a notion. Human empowerment is a purely individual metric. What is empowering to one person may be dis-empowering to another: Sans the harm of others, all are correct.

What Does It Mean to be Human?

I would not consider Squinky an example of an empowered straight woman, because Squinky is not a straight woman. Only Squinky can attest to the experience of being someone who was born female, but identifies as Gender-queer. This experience is as unique and valuable as every member of the complex human species. I argue further, only a woman can relate their own unique experiences, to which I am not, as a heterosexual male, effected.

Rather, Squinky speaks to me as an empowered person in general, overcoming the emotional scars and experiences that ring true for people of many walks of life and struggles: going on to be true to themselves and to use their emotional breakthroughs to help others. For different reasons, I can identify with the themes of alienation, loneliness, social awkwardness and impostor syndrome that serve as emotional baggage from my own life struggles. I understand first hand what it feels like to be Othered: Not in the same way as Squinky, or the same way as a woman in a society built upon religious patriarchal obsolescence, but it isn't a concept foreign to me. The fact that someone which is different than myself has felt some of these same things brings me a sense of inner strength and connectedness. A sense of knowing, if you will. The theme of "Why People Matter" rings so true when playing through the various mini-games on Squinky's website. It's so often that people get hung up on high minded ideologies, systems or isms, but forget that as individuals, we all have common experiences that bond us. I would go so far to argue, the game model that Squinky, and others of the same mindset are bringing to the table are tracts in the service of Humanism itself, to which is lacking in greater society. The empowered human individual can be more of a powerful weapon than all of the guns, bombs, or dare I say corporations the world has at it's disposal.

Personal Connection

As a father of two girls, I am aware that one reality they will have to face in their lives is the societal pressure to stay away from technical fields deemed to be unladylike (*Don't get into programming, that stuff is for boys*). Even at a young age, I see it starting and it frightens me. In my view, this creates a situation in which mostly men are equipped with the tools to create the culture of the future (*games*). My eldest daughter is already taking a liking to gaming and connects with it in her own way. She has a collection of her own games (*god awful to my sensibilities as they may be*) and often asks to sit in my lap to watch me play mine. She'll give her opinions as I go ("I like how that looks, dad.", "That guy's mean, you going to beat him up?", "What happens if you go in there?", "Uh oh! There's a guy behind you, I hear the bad guy sound!") "That cave is too scary, I'm gonna go play my game now!"). At the ripe old age of 4, she came to me bashfully. . . saying that she wanted to make a game of her own, and ask me if I thought she could one day. My 30 something gamer heart swelled with pride. That's my girl! I hope she eventually follows through, unless of course she finds something else to her liking (*she's also quite the budding musician*). Thankfully, organizations and education are starting to tip the scales to more of an inclusive model, which is starting to shift the industry away from monoculture. While this inclusivity trend is exceedingly positive, the skeptic in me tends to ask 'inclusive into what?'

Centralized Worker Borg vs. Decentralized Expressive Individuals

As changes in the medium that people use to engage with culture shift, so will the importance of how this medium is made. If the methods of culture creation are kept by a select few publishers, how is this different than the time before the printing press? This regime reeks of an elite few deciding who can have access to culture creation, and who may not. Though it may open it's doors for more of a diverse employee base, the status-quo remains untouched, and mavericks neutralized. In this paradigm, the masses merely consume or react to the culture that the gatekeepers curate for them. This narrows their scope of self to whatever the few executives writing the paychecks decide it to be. Time is merely all that's needed to turn heresy into canon. Given time, what makes games (*as an expression of culture*) any different?

Taking this current regime further, as evidenced in Sqinky's game "Quings Quest", even if marginalized voices are given the tools to create such culture, or jobs which they might be gainfully employed, will they merely use their skills to enhance someone else's pre-existing mouthpiece? It's fine and good to balance the demographics of the current order (*I welcome that as well*), though this still seeks to reinforce an ever-shrinking pool of competition, quite similar to that of old-media (*5 companies own nearly all of the print, recorded and broadcast media globally . . . Now they're gobbling up ISPs . . . Are games next?*).

Though it's possible that a large panopticon of Big Gaming (or 'Standard Gaming' if you will allow me to indulge an allusion) will see dollar signs attached toward increased inclusion, and thus broader demographics that will fill balance sheets. This merely appears to me to be a business move to corner untapped markets.

Even though this pandering may take place, creating a largely inclusive cultural experience, the communication in question must be filtered through channels of bureaucratic suits and bean counters: Subject to financial concerns over that of expression. They play it safe for fear of offending the perceived formless mass of 'harrumphing' consumer culture. They see bold experimentation as untested and risky.

Even mass market games of high esteem tend to be developed by independent entities (*Rockstar Games & Bethesda*), though larger culture sometimes bans those in a misunderstanding of context. For now, they represent a quality of output that rivals other mediums of artist expression. These companies are still resistant toward being absorbed by the corporate Borg (*which, presumably aides in their high quality artfulness, whether mass market appeal is the object or not*), though they may (*and probably will*) begin to evolve into a new Borg as time goes on and business cycles run their course.

The concluding statement to this should hopefully contrast the overall cautionary tale in favor of a celebration

of the ever-present, yet currently growing gaming counter-culture. This is evidence that honesty and self-expression makes connections with those who seek it, and that through the use of technology, individuals can be empowered to tell their own stories without a high barrier of entry. As evidenced from Squinky's creations, one doesn't even need high production values, massive hype or high budgets. . . Merely, just the will to create, a little bit of know how and something to express (whatever that may be).

I welcome any and all of it. More people expressing themselves can never be a bad thing. More games from more perspectives, from large groups and from individuals. It's a vibrant medium that is just starting to truly stretch its legs as it's FINALLY starting to become accepted as artful and socially relevant (rather than mere childhood toys).