

gaming graphic novel

Game Invader
Anand Ramachandran
 is a creative and business consultant specialising in gaming. He blogs at www.bosstfight.in. Feedback to this article can be sent to anand.rdx@gmail.com

Tragedy in videogames — signpost or fad?

In the past few months, I've played three A-list games which end in tragedy — specifically with the death of the player character. And I'm not talking about independent or experimental games here — I'm talking regular videogame blockbusters, the kind that usually feature a predictable hero-saves-the-universe-kicks-bad-guy's-butt ending. And only one of them was an RPG, a genre that often features multiple endings. In the other two games, the player dying was the only possible conclusion — inevitable tragedy.

This is a surprising departure from the norm, and left me wondering if it was merely a trend or a development that assumes any significance for the evolution of the art form.

A couple of things to address quickly: I'm not saying that games don't feature tragedy at all. Many games have managed to deliver tear-jerking moments of emotional resonance. The famous deaths of Aerith (in Final Fantasy VII) and Agro (in Shadow Of The Colossus). When you lose your team members during the final mission of Mass Effect 2. Any tragic consequence of your actions in any self-respecting RPG. There are many examples — but almost never the death of the player character, especially in a mainstream blockbuster action game.

In a conversation with a friend recently, we explored how any medium usually loses out on tragedy as it grows into mainstream acceptance, and artistic valuations give way to commercial considerations. What follows is a glut of feel-good content, where the audience gets a few laughs, some titillation, and the pleasure of seeing the good guys win. However, once the market stabilises and the mainstream is conquered, edgier content makes a return — we start seeing darker, more tragic, more mature elements.

A quick look at other media (cinema, TV, comics, books) seems to confirm this. All of these forms have settled into a comfortable position where all kinds of mature content co-exist cheerfully with the cheesy mainstream.

If you examine the history of videogames, almost all early videogames can be technically described as "tragedies" — they only end when you run out of lives and die. The Space Invaders will always reach earth. Pac-Man will always get eaten by the monsters. The Missile Command only protects the cities for a while before they eventually fail. It's always been futile and hopeless, in the best traditions of great tragedy. However, it's a stretch to imagine that they were intended to be tragic — all the designers wanted was a 'lose' condition to end the game, so that the next n00b could be parted from his/her quarters. It was only much, much later that the idea of ending games with a 'win' condition became prevalent. A convention that is still dominant today.

Does it mean, then, that videogames are beginning to turn a cultural corner? It's hard to say, but I'd like to think that game developers are beginning to feel more comfortable with the fact that they're catering to an audience that goes beyond the "trash-talking thrill-seeking teenage boys' stereotype" — and are willing to take creative calls that recognise this. It's undeniable that videogames are increasingly being accepted as mainstream entertainment (if not art), and it's only a matter of time before the medium settles down into the comfort zone I described earlier.

Of course, the current surge in 'tragic endings' may still turn out to be just another of those trends (psi-powers, physics puzzles, obligatory vehicle sequences) which disappear when the next one comes along. We'll have to wait and watch.



FIFA 11

Videep Vijay Kumar finds that a lot has changed in the iconic FIFA series this year, as the sport meets its match in the game

For football fans all over the world, October is a pretty significant month. It's not just that time of the year when all the big leagues around the world have kicked off and begin to look interesting, it's also the month when EA Canada release the next version of the iconic FIFA series. I suppose one could argue that not much has changed this year, but the truth is that a lot has.

Let's first take a look at what's been added in FIFA 11. For starters, PC gamers are no longer left with a 'neither here nor there' version of FIFA, thanks to EA implementing the next-gen gameplay engine in the PC version. While it may lack certain bells and whistles, support for higher resolutions and GPU-driven anti-aliasing ensure that the PC version is a real looker — the best among all platforms. The PC version also sports a feature called 'FIFA World', which is like a FIFA MMO, allowing players from all over the world to compete against each other and get ranked. PC players will also have access to features that they didn't previously have access to, such as 360-degree dribbling, 5-versus-5 online play and custom tactics.



The next-gen version of 'Be A Pro' is also available in the PC version. All in all, PC gamers get a good deal for less than half the price of the console versions. However, it's only visually that both versions are on par with the console versions getting some interesting new additional features.

'Personality plus' was a much touted feature when FIFA 11 was taken on the road, and it's a good addition for sure. It gives certain players special abilities and behavioural tendencies (when controlled by the AI) during certain situations. For instance, a good dribbler will be able to negotiate small spaces in-between defenders and a long-shot specialist will be able to hit the back of the net from incredible ranges. While it may be piped as something new, we've seen this before in older iterations such as FIFA World Cup 2002 (the first to sport special skill abilities) and subsequently in FIFA World Cup 2006, but there's no doubt that FIFA 11's implementation of the same has been the best so far thanks to the fact that literally hundreds of players have unique traits and skill sets.

'Pro Passing' is another interesting addition that puts the onus on the player. You can now direct your pass with incredible accuracy (providing the player controlled possesses the skills), unlike previous versions. Not only does this give you a sense of accomplishment when finishing off a move involving complex passing, it eliminates 'ping pong' passing that was commonplace in previous versions where the mindless combination of short-pass/short-pass/

one-two/through-ball often yielded incredible results. The console versions of 'Be A Pro' and 'Manager Mode' have been merged into one mode called the 'Career Mode' which allows you to play as manager, player or player-manager. In my opinion this is the best addition to the game, giving you the feeling of participating in several seasons of a major European league on your terms. Don't like the complexity associated with manager mode? Just get into it as a player. Enjoy wasting innumerable hours setting up training regimens, negotiating contracts and improving stadium facilities as well as slotting three goals past the opposition on the pitch? Imitate Gianluca Vialli and play both as player and manager. If you want to jump into the action and not worry about things like team management and tactics, choose to play as a player alone, or choose to control the whole team in the game's career mode. EA have also added an option where you play only as the goalie. This is boring, and also doesn't feel as polished as the rest of the game — positioning being a problem thanks to the game occasionally dropping frames when your goal's under threat.

In terms of gameplay, you feel that there's a lot more 'weight' to the game this time around. FIFA 10 was a fine effort which felt less 'floaty' when compared to '09, while World Cup 2010 South Africa was an improvement on FIFA 10. FIFA 11 has (as one would expect) taken the best from both the World Cup game and FIFA 10, blending it to perfection while adding some of the nifty 'new features' that I've talked about. The gameplay really does feel tighter and scoring goals harder both when playing against a human player or against the much-improved AI. Visual improvements have ensured that a lot of famous players look uncannily like their real-world counterparts, but go to some of the lesser known leagues and you'll still find a fair deal of zombie footballers (not to mention paper-zombie crowd). Audio is well produced and the ability to customise chants is a great addition.

Verdict

The world's favourite sport meets its match in FIFA 11, the best iteration of the sports franchise to date.

—videep@gmail.com



FIFA 11
 Platform: PS3, PC, X360
 Genre: Sports - Football
 Developer: EA Canada
 Publisher: Electronic Arts
 MRP: ₹999 (PC) | ₹2,499 (PS3 & X360)

Gangsters and ghosts in a new format

By Anisha Sridhar

Saurav Mohapatra, best known as the author of the graphic novel series *Devi* and *India Authentic* is all set to release two new graphic novels in 2011. *Mumbai Confidential* — a noir-ish series about the gangster life in Mumbai and *Dhurandhar* — a supernatural story about a medium who performs one last task for the souls of the dead.

"*Mumbai Confidential* is not a scholarly piece," Mohapatra says. He describes the graphic novel series about Mumbai police's encounter specialists who are given the nod by the establishment to carry out extra-judicial killings of gangsters as more of a "love song to the sub-genre of Hindi movies loosely called 'Mumbai Noir'". Heavily influenced by films of the genre, like *Satya*, *Company* and *Black Friday*, *Mumbai Confidential* is a noirish thriller set in the world of encounter cops and the Mumbai underworld. Mohapatra teamed up with artist Vivek Shinde (Virgin Comics) to create the series. "Vivek is a Mumbaier and has an excellent feel for the soul of the city," he says. "So we always joke that Vivek adds the 'Mumbai' and I bring the 'Confidential' to the project."

All jokes aside, the art work for *Mumbai Confidential* is dark and gritty. Rendered in black and white by Vivek Shinde, the panels are more realistic than fans of Indian comics may be used to seeing. Shinde, a talented artist, makes use of the powerful "painted style" to create panels that are so realistic as to feel



familiar. "I wanted something hyper-real for the art," Mohapatra says. "We experimented originally with a stark B/W high contrast style. But once I saw the grayscale wash painted style, I couldn't really visualise it in any other way."

While *Mumbai Confidential* will only be available to the public in the summer of 2011, a preview of one of the first stories in the series, 'Good Cop, Bad

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Mohapatra: "*Dhurandhar* is a supernatural/occult story I co-created with artist Siddharth Panwar. I lovingly refer to it as Indian heartland magic realism. It's about a man named Damodar Dhurandhar, who serves as the medium between the world of spirits and our own. His job is to do one last errand for the spirits of the recently dead so that they can move on."

Dhurandhar and *Mumbai Confidential* were created under the banner 'Dichkaon', a creator-owned project spawned by Mohapatra to "seed off a creator-owned comics culture in India." Under the banner Mohapatra hopes to create comics in genres not traditionally explored in India. He also tries as much as possible to mentor upcoming artists and provide them with exposure. "I got started in the business with the help of Gotham Chopra," Mohapatra reminisces, "and so I try to pay it forward."

His advice to young comics writers and artists? "Go online," he says. "Basically getting someone to read your pitch is pretty hard. Set your work up online, offer it for free and build your portfolio from there." Solid advice considering how much of Mohapatra's work is online — both his own and work done with Virgin Comics, available as free downloads on his website.

Check out Saurav Mohapatra's website at www.mohaps.com for previews of his comics and more.

— Anisha Sridhar writes all day and sometimes gets paid for it. anisha_sridhar@hotmail.com

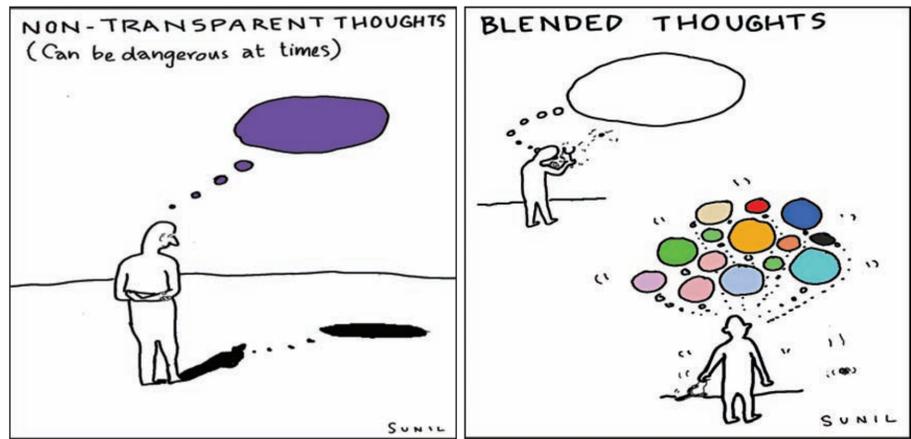
small talk | Gokul Gopalakrishnan

Gokul Gopalakrishnan dreams of getting syndicated so he can quit his day job as an RTO Inspector. He researches on Graphic Novels at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. Write to him at gogul.tg@gmail.com



bursting bubbles | Sunil Raj

Sunil has returned to drawing cartoons after many years in the corporate world. His cartoons use bubbles to illustrate how we converse with our thoughts. sunilraj@yahoo.com



drawing conclusions | Arun Ramkumar

Arun is a freelance cartoonist and an awkward fellow of dubious skills, none of which includes successfully coping with daily life. See more at arun-bohemianwanderer.blogspot.com



Top videogame plot devices due for retirement



Evil postponed

Nobody in videogame land ever throws away a good villain. They may, however, consider sealing him away. Games are escapism, sure, and we may not want them to entirely resemble life. It's just that life is shockingly free of ultimate evils waiting to punch their way through dimensions, and in videogames this is something that happens every Tuesday.



The Chosen One

You happen to be a half-elf vampire who will liberate the land of Imaginatia from the vile forces of Who Gives a Crap. It's possible for a protagonist to get my attention without actually being a straight up messiah figure. If anything, it's actually more engaging when the one up against impossible odds is just some guy who hasn't been infected with werewolf blood. And you know who else is just some guy? The Batman.



Schopenhauer villains

Why go to the trouble of building realistic motivations for villainous bastardry when they, maybe your white-haired down with the keys to the Precursor's Solar Destructosphere figured out that the universe is a cold void and nothing matters, so he might as well go around being an ass? Well because, most of us don't have the energy to carry it off past our 16th birthday and you might as well go with stock Nazis.



Save the world

Saving the whole damn planet, or occasionally the universe, is just overkill. I'd be suitably motivated and impressed if I were tasked with rescuing a pet frog if it were set up in the right way. Portal had me giving more of a damn about a box with hearts painted on it than I've managed to care about half the doomed fantasy worlds that I'm told will fall into The Burning Souldorm or whatever without my help.



Temporary amnesia

Need an excuse to explain every basic detail of your meticulously constructed world? Make sure the protagonist was struck in the head shortly before the story started. Final Fantasy games in general do this a lot, but the eighth instalment takes the taco when pretty much the entire cast have had their memories blanked for reasons that are far, far too stupid to repeat here.



<http://www.lup.com/do/feature?cid=3177803>

antidep | Jaya Madhavan & Bindhu Malini

Bindhu Malini is a trained classical musician and a graphic illustrator, and is clueless about her life. Her elder sister, Jaya Madhavan is a poet and children's writer, and is more clueless about her life. They find comfort in Antidep.



mailantidep@gmail.com