

Why Weapons?

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While cynics and conservative culture-critics usually attribute the use of weapons in games as signs of a moral decline, there are other reasons why weapons have played such a big role in the video gaming industry. My preferred argument to counter such criticism is a historic observation: video-gaming is a new form of entertainment and every single new invention in that field has led to mockery and scorn from the older generation in human history. This reflex to shun and sneer at cultural innovations / deviations can be dated back as far as Plato and Socrates (shown in expressions of alarm over the ways of the youth) and in most recent history one can find big debates readily available about the evil of pulp-fiction, radio and tv. Usually the ones who argue the hardest against innovations are also those with the least amount of knowledge and experience with them, because they see themselves morally opposed to them. By embracing the video gaming-culture some answers can be found to why weapons have been so predominant in games....

Like most forms of artistic expressions video games are in many ways a mirror of the culture in which they were created and also have had a tremendous influence back on culture. Video-gaming emerged in an era of technological advancements, but also in an era of cold-war and cultural change. So it was only natural to find themes of war and nuclear holocaust in games, especially since the first computers were produced to help the military by playing war-game simulations. Some of the video-game pioneers even started out as military scientists. So finding weapons as a means of interaction in games seems like it was bound to happen. With the evolution of the hardware, games have also evolved above and beyond the early arcade games and have become as versatile as the human imagination. Still war and weapons can be found in many games. Why is that so?

There are many answers to the questions and the most obvious ones are that games still are a mirror of our society and culture and that wars and violence haven't ceased to exist. But i will focus on answers that are more psychological / human-factors related in nature:

In a good story weapons are often used sparsely as a means to an end in a dramatic climax. And although games usually have a story (even Doom had one), it is often only the backdrop to explain the gameplay-context. And gameplay is all about manipulation of the game-environment, so "a-means-to-an-end" is often used excessively. While a lot of those manipulations aren't done by weapons per se, weapons have become a standard for certain genres in particular. My assumption is that input- / control-periphery, dimensionality and self-efficacy are the main reasons for the prevalence of weapons in certain game-types:

..... input- / control-periphery The periphery has as much evolved over the years as the computer-hardware and we have controllers nowadays as diverse as keyboards, mice, dual-analog force-feedback wireless game pads, wheels & joysticks, guitars, drum kits and congas. Not to mention the fascinating wii-controllers. Which i just mentioned. But from this multitude of controllers to choose from only select few are great for using guns / weapons in games (I'll ignore the gun-shaped-controllers found in arcades and as rare console peripherals as they aren't used widely).

gamepads

the epicentre of console-gaming has never been great for shooters, as the digital directional keys make aiming hard. Even with the latest dual-analogue controllers games like halo need an auto-aiming feature to make it a worthwhile experience. In 3D environments they are great for jump & run and racing- and flying-games

joysticks (&steering-wheels)

Only really great for flight-sims (which not necessarily have a use for a fire-button) and racing games

mouse & keyboard

this is THE best controller for 3D-shooters and the success of those games can't be discussed without discussing the role of the mouse and keyboard as controllers. It makes moving in and the manipulation of a 3D-environment very

easy

..... dimensionality The way a game renders a scene has a tremendous amount of effect on what controllers are applicable and how the player moves and interacts with the given gaming-environment. There is a great variety of useful controlling schemes and a large variety of non-violent game-concepts for 2-dimensional games, but as soon as a game adds that 3rd dimension, the controlling schemes become more complex. To cope with the additional dimension console-controllers have dual-analog sticks nowadays, which still can't beat the ease of use of the combination of mouse and keyboard. Navigating through 3D worlds that way takes some effort to learn and doesn't leave much controlling-capacity to deal with environmental manipulation. In my opinion this is one of the biggest reasons why guns / weapons are so commonly used in 3D-games. Because it is only one click added to the rather complex feature of navigating through the map. There are also a lot of point-and-shoot games out there, that are based solely on the mouse as input, because it is so efficient for fast and accurate targetting. And any handheld pointing device that will match the mouse in accuracy and speed in the future will most likely also be prone for use as a controller for guns in games. So going back to 2D gaming concepts is the easiest way to make it easier to produce games that don't necessarily need guns / weapons, which interestingly a lot of independent game developers do at the moment (check out Aquaria or Crayons for example). Or as a great example on the Wii look at Rayman's Raving Rabbids, which uses the input-controllers in many different ways. Still the game uses a plunger-shooting-gun for many 3D game-sequences, which just reinforces my assumption that 3D is the most prone to have "shooting" as a means of environmental interaction.

..... self-efficacy This is most likely the most basic reason for the continued use of guns / weapons in games. Apart from being easy to understand as a manipulatory device, the use of a weapon also leads to a very fast way of interaction with the environment. And the feeling of being able to have an effect on the virtual world is a very rewarding one in itself. This effect is facilitated if it is shown in great detail and has other in-game rewards attached to it.

A real-world example for the power of self-efficacy:

The faculty I studied and worked at has an old elevator, that is very slow in closing the doors. But it also has one of those close-doors button. One day I noticed that nearly all of the people who work there used that button nearly all the time and I got curious. I stopped the time the elevator needed to close the doors on its own and the time when you pushed the button. It was identical in 10 of 10 times! I then watched the "button-pushers" again and found out that they did so after a small delay (perhaps after getting slightly annoyed by the slowness of the closing mechanism). This annoyance-delay, together with the time needed to push the button, was enough to bring the button-press and the automatically closing doors so close to each other, that people must have felt the rewarding feeling of self-efficacy when seeing the doors close after the button-pressing. After talking to some of the people some even stopped pushing it.

Games also often change the felt self-efficacy by assigning different properties to the assorted weapons. Let's look at Quake 2 as a good example for great weapons. The weapons vary in the rate of fire, the damage that is done to the environment (i.e. enemies) and the speed of the projectiles. The higher the rate of fire is (e.g. the Hyperblaster, a fast shooting weapon with low individual impact), the higher the effect / impact of your weapon is (Supershotgun, Railgun, BFG), the higher the speed of the projectile is (Railgun), the better the feeling of self-efficacy is transported. This rewarding feeling of agency of virtual-world manipulation is also heightened in 3D-games through the first-person perspective, as it literally puts oneself into the centre of the action. Other games add terrain-deformation and damage to all sorts of objects to enrich this experience.

Conclusion: In my opinion video games use guns / weapons so often, because the mouse and keyboard are such a widespread controller-combination and 3D-worlds work particularly well with player-manipulations like "shooting", because it instills a feeling of self-efficacy and because of its ease of use. If future controllers can reduce the complexity of navigating 3d-worlds (using head-movement detection or similar), this could free up the player's resources to make more complex manipulations in the virtual world and more non-violent 3D video-games could be one of the positive

outcomes. How far non-violence in games helps to reduce real-world violence remains a hot topic though and needs to be addressed separately.

As far as i know there is no good literature on games and self-efficacy so take a look at google or scientific search-engines. If you find something worthwhile, feel free to email me the results