

Kate Kennedy

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### Can Games Bring Social Change Final

After an entire quarter of discussing the game industry's effect on social change, I think it is still fair to say that games can bring about social change, even in ways one might not entirely expect. From including diverse casts of characters, to promoting healthy habits, to making a statement about social issues, video games give an outlet for creatives to start a conversation about social change in a way that is much more interactive than any other art form. I will reflect on the three games I've written about extensively this quarter to show how social change can be brought about through games in unique ways. Games like *Overwatch*, *Abzu*, and *Papo & Yo* give an insight about how different game designers approach social change within their creations.

To start with the latter, *Papo & Yo* is a game that pristinely introduces a difficult subject to the minds of gamers; domestic violence. It focuses on a young Brazilian boy's struggle with his alcoholic, abusive father, and how he compartmentalizes this conflict in his own fantasy world. While the subject matter is extremely dark, the game is colorful, whimsical, and fun for players, showing that games can make a statement while still being entertaining. Based on the personal struggle of the designer himself, and his troubled past with an abusive father, there is a sort of labor of love that can be seen within the story of the game, taking from real experience, rather than simply being shown as an outsider's view. Not only does this game talk about such issues in a way that is accessible to a wide audience, but it also provides an outlet for someone who has suffered at the hands of an abusive loved one. It shows that games can bring about social change by opening a door to speak about issues

that are hard to talk about, while also allowing for those that have been in those position to have their story told.

On the side of health, games like *Abzu* provide players with a chance to unwind from the stressors of everyday life in a way that is much less blatant than your average health-related game. Many think of health games as those that give you rewards for running a certain distance, meditating for a set amount of time per day, or other clearly health-related objectives. *Abzu* and other games from the same family like *Flower*, *Flow*, and *Journey* use a mixture of meditation and video games as an art form to seamlessly blend health with fun and aesthetics. *Abzu* does a double-down with social change here, as it's a game that features the aesthetically-pleasing setting of ocean biomes, the main goal being to solve puzzles that restore life to a dying sea. One is whisked away into a world of relaxation, encouraged to finish the game at one's leisure, while also learning about the ocean along the way. It makes a statement about climate change, as well as providing a stress-free outlet for those experiencing anxiety. Health games do not have to be so obviously about health to be beneficial to the player's psyche, as these type of games show. They work as more of a slow walk through a museum, full of treasures, hidden wonders, beautiful sights, and slow-paced recreation that can be perused as quickly, or as leisurely as the player may like.

Finally, the first game I used to talk about social change in the beginning of the quarter is my personal favorite; *Overwatch*. Brainchild of *WoW*-creator, Blizzard, *Overwatch* appears at first glance as your average first-person shooter paired with the colorful cast and settings you'd expect from any Blizzard game. Though I believe that the 2016 "Game of the Year" winner was more than just a fun cooperative shooter, and instead, a bold statement about where video games are heading in terms of their character development. The game has been famous for breaking barriers and shattering negative stereotypes, while celebrating unique cultural achievements of their characters. With a cast that includes an ever-growing roster of currently 26 characters, the game consists of 17 nationalities from 5 continents, 11

women, 12 people of color, 10+ with canon disabilities (which often become that hero's strength), 1 confirmed gay character (with more to rumored to be in the cast), 3 sentient robots, and one genetically-enhanced intelligent talking gorilla. That's a lot to condense there, yet *Overwatch* does so in a way that creates a complexity to the lore of its otherwise arguably simple 6v6 shooter game that does not feel like forced inclusion or affirmative action. To give some examples, one character, Pharah, is a female fighter-pilot that man's an Iron Man-like suit. She is Egyptian, with Canadian First Nation heritage, and her character design shows her with an athletic build and body-covering armor, similar to what you might expect for a male character in contrast to the skimpy outfits we are used to seeing in fighting games. She is juxtaposed with her own mother, Ana, who is a 60 year old with a lot of fight in her. Once one of the greatest snipers in the world, she lost an eye in a particularly trying mission. Yet, she is still formidable. This is only scratching the surface of characters that are not only complex in origin, but in story. One fan favorite is the black Brazilian DJ, Lucio, who uses music to heal his team. He's positive, fun, and much less dark and brooding than a lot of his counterparts, often cheering his team to victory in-game. Still, his character has a complex set of goals, as a kid from the slums that brought hope to his community through his creativity, he aims to protect the citizens of Rio's favelas from the encroachment of corporate-funded science facilities. His character makes a bold statement about a strikingly familiar problem of the displacement of the poor for the sake of the "greater good" in Brazil, though this all takes place in the future. His arch nemesis in the lore is an Indian scientist who goes by Symmetra. Growing up in a poor household with a brilliant mind, she ends up being taken up by the Vishkar Corporation that uses her innovations in architecture to further their plans. She is canonically on the autism spectrum, with signs of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and Asperger's, which plays into how she handles situations, as she continues to explore her morality in relation with her science. She also has a cybernetic hand that aids her in her studies. Finally, some of the characters are quite strong messages hidden in small packages. Enter D.Va, the youngest of the group at just 19, yet a skilled Korean Army

combatant. She flies a huge tank-like mech that is used to fight robots attacking Korea. What's interesting about D.Va, is her background as a professional gamer, the Starcraft champion of Korea, which makes her into a formidable fighter in the real world. It paints not only gamers in a positive light, but female gamers, who are often disrespected in competitive circles.

I could go on and on about how each unique character in *Overwatch* has their own backstory, background, and motives that make the game diverse, but what is really most important to know is how these characters are put up against each other. While there are several different allegiances the characters hold, whether they be part of the good-doing *Overwatch*, the sinister *Talon*, or one of the many splinter organizations that vary for each character, the main point of the game is to build of a team of six of them in order to face a common enemy. For the sake of the game, that common enemy is simply the other team, but in the lore, the Omnics are that shared opponent. The Omnics are the robotic overlords that tried to take over Earth, and with the help of *Overwatch*, were subdued during the Omnic Crisis. Still, Omnics have become part of the society after this war, with three of them actually being compelling playable characters of varying intelligence and humanity ranging from Bastion, a Wall-E type ex-war machine with a peaceful side paired with PTSD who has no dialogue aside from beeps and boops, to Orisa, a cuddly-looking, buffalo-like protector of the public built out of the remnants of the old police force robots in the fictional Omnic-friendly African city of Numbani, by a little girl who is a robotics prodigy (think Baymax from *Big Hero 6*), to Zenyatta, a humanoid android monk who preaches for harmony amongst man and machine. They too are seamlessly added to the roster of the human cast, and one soon forgets they are not human in reality. There is a strong message within the game where race relations are approached not with their diverse cast (who are inharmonious due to political, moral, and emotional reasons, not ethnic background), but instead through the civil rights movement that takes place in the game's lore. Omnics are treated by some as human, and others as machine, and this is seen through the game's comics, cinematics, and in-game

dialogue. There is an issue of race and otherness that is approached within this narrative that brings to mind the issues we face in current times, while not making it expressly about current times. With an ethnically, sexually, ability, and gender diverse cast, one can assume the issues of race relations as we know them have been somewhat illuminated in favor of a different cause. With characters in *Overwatch* conversing and concerning over issues of Omnic segregation in cities, romantic relationships between man and machine, and personal vendettas they have against each other, it's clear what Blizzard is trying to get across by removing the real-world reality from the equation; to look at the issues of race, gender, ableism, and sexuality from a fictional lens. The game is not only able to bring together a group of extremely diverse characters to wage battle, but makes a point to celebrate their cultures while not making the game about stereotypes or race relations. A lot of the characters act as great role models and representation for many that may see themselves as different from the "norm." Many people have never been able to play a character that reminds them of themselves due to the influx of mostly white straight male protagonists, so this game provides an opportunity for more people to have a character they can play as that represents them better in some way. The issues are there, but neatly packed into a well-oiled machine where one must infer on their own what the developers are saying about race, gender, disabilities, and sexuality in our given day and the future, sparking a conversation.

Video games provide an interactive experience that cannot be compared to film, music, or traditional art, as unlike these mediums which at the very most require only passive consumption, video games absolutely require complete engagement to be used to their potential. Because of this, making games that make strong points about keeping healthy, taking a stand against injustice, and talking about tough topics, can be an amazing interactive way for designers to reach their audience about issues they are passionate about. Games can bring about social change from something as simple as calming anxiety, to something as difficult as talking about helping people in domestic abuse situations, to something as revolutionary as being able to show all walks of life, ethnic backgrounds, and types of people

that deserve to be represented in the same game. If this is where we're starting on games for social change, we're off to a great start.