FUN INC: Why games are the 21st Century’s most serious business
By Tom Chatfield
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Computer games generally get a bad press. They are seen as a dangerous addiction luring young minds into fantasy worlds. Those who become entranced by the virtual lives they lead are incapable of shaking the habit. To some the virtual becomes more important than the actual.

I was led to offer to review the above book in Logos by my grandson-in-law Steve, because when we asked him what he would like as a Christmas present, he asked for a copy of Dante’s Inferno. This was a surprise to my wife and me, but we gladly obtained a handsome hardbound copy of The Divine Comedy, of which the Inferno is the first part. Because Steve is not a literary type, we were curious about his choice of gift, so we asked him why he wanted to read it. His answer was that it was the subject of a forthcoming computer game and the book contained many of the answers, so he wanted to read it in advance.

This led me into a dialogue with him and I learned some (to me) astonishing facts about computer games. They are a bigger industry than television - $46bn a year. The average age of the compulsive devotees (let’s not call them addicts) is thirty-five, and 40% of them are women. “Is there anything educational about them?” “No, they are purely entertainment.” “Why do they contain so much violence?” “Because they enable players to feel they are experiencing actual danger. They are not only the ones firing the guns, but deciding to fire the guns.” “Do they contain any sex?” “Very little.”

The cost of the game based on Dante’s Inferno was £40 – three times the price of the book. Later, Steve told me that he didn’t buy it. It was badly reviewed. Reviewed? I pricked up my ears. Yes, there are several magazines (the one that Steve subscribes to is Games TM) which not only give critical reviews of the titles, but discuss the affairs of the industry. These made the Business Section of The London Times recently.

“Just as the world’s largest video games maker seemed cornered by mutinous foes, it has launched a surprise fight back.” The Times reported the name of the company is Activision Blizzard which is being sued by thirty-eight past and present employees who helped to create Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 which is described as the most successful video game in history. The lawsuit is for $500m. The disgruntled employees accuse the company of holding them to ransom by withholding bonuses.

The story is ornamented by pictures of the founders of Activision Blizzard, Vince Zampella and Jason West, cheerful young fellas in torn jeans, who have left Activision and are now suing each other. A stream of key workers, the report says, from Infinity Ward, a studio owned by Activision have found new jobs at Respawn Entertainment, a new studio founded by West and Zampella “in association with Activision’s biggest rival, Electronic Arts”. While sounding like a typical tale of corporate discord, this story gives a sidelong on the workings of a worldwide industry which has not attracted much government attention, except in South Korea where addiction to gaming is seen as a serious social issue. A recent story in The New York Times told about a Korean couple in their early forties who left their one-room apartment every night to go to an Internet café where they played computer games till dawn. “Each one raised a virtual daughter who followed them everywhere and was fed, dressed and cuddled – all with a few clicks of the mouse.” Returning home after a twelve-hour game session, they found their actual daughter dead of malnutrition. They were given two years in prison, the wife’s sentence being suspended because she was seven months pregnant.

The number of adult games players in their twenties and thirties in South Korea (975,000 last year) is larger than the number of teenage addicts. However teenage addicts are more vulnerable. The Sunday Times ran a feature recently with pictures of glassy-eyed sub-teenagers who are the despair of their parents because they cannot be lured out of their rooms, and spend their entire waking hours playing computer games.
In the light of this lurid press background, contrasting with Steve’s measured defence, I bought a copy of Tom Chatfield’s book, which, I found, is a skilful effort to represent computer games as a wholesome pastime. Chatfield, born in 1980, had his first gaming experience at the age of seven which, in spite of what was then seen as its innovative construction he now sees as a “love child of a toaster and an obese typewriter”. It became his one-way ticket to the information age. He began to realise that video games “were much more than mere toys: they were a way of exploring, and attempting to create, whole other worlds”.

Explaining why he has written a book about an electronic medium, Chatfield concedes that “the written word offers still the most important tool we have for making sense of our own experience” and adds his belief that books and games are compatible, even complementary. He even claims, contrary to the lurid press reports, that “the best games are a trigger for discussion, reading and writing”, and that “the debate surrounding video games is fast becoming one of the most urgent and exciting intellectual discourses in both the arts and the sciences”. This scarcely accords with the title of the book, but Chatfield says that it is nowadays hard to tell “where the serious business of play ends and the playful business of work begins”. Games are a serious business.

Each of the book’s eleven chapters acknowledges the criticisms of video games and then sets out diplomatically to demolish them. The first four chapters deal with the definition of fun, the technology, the business side (headed “A licence to print money”) and the scientific basis for game playing. The author then edges into the question of the social impact of games playing. “For many people,” he argues “as they get older and find the world around them is increasingly complicated and packed with uncertainties, the existence of some other place over which they have complete control and to which they can always return is one of the most powerful motivators of all”. To me this is escapism.

In the following chapter Chatfield cites three criticisms: (1) Games players are hearers of many things, but learn nothing; (2) games playing is a pastime of mindlessness and disillusion; (3) players “become like blinking lizards, motionless, absorbed, only the twitching of their hands showing that they are still conscious”. He calls these criticisms precipitate judgements which do not allow for what he sees as a period of transition. He points out that the division between players and non-players is “still largely generational”, an assertion which does not quite square with the average age of thirty-five. He makes a virtue of this growing average age and claims that games are becoming more constructive. He compares the new wave with traditional board games or sports days and maintains that the games industry is reflecting its more mature audience by becoming more responsible.

But can the industry be left to regulate itself? In Germany all games involving violence have been banned. This was as a result of a multiple school killing in 2009, when it was revealed that the seventeen-year-old killer was an addict of “first-person-shooter” games. Chatfield dismisses the German reaction as “inaccurate scapegoating”. The school massacre was a “rare and extremely disturbing” case. Crime is going down while the playing of video games is increasing exponentially. “To deny the link between games and violence in society is not, however, to say that gaming is a medium without its hazards”.

He compares the social impact of games with the fears about pornography on the Internet, which he claims has receded. “Ninety-nine per cent of web traffic is non-pornographic”. There will always be those who wish to return to the “alleged simplicities of an older world”, but “the case cannot be made for the virtues of reading, conversation or even television-watching simply by pouring scorn on something else”.

Subsequent chapters deal with less controversial issues. The main thrust of the book is that the growth of video games is inevitable, their appeal being rooted in human nature and history. Steve thinks that the book is a fair assessment. To me, it’s an apologia. Still, what about freedom? If people want to spend large amounts of time playing games, they should be free to do so.

I had two worries before I started to read this book, which reading it did not assuage.

One is that video games are an uncontrolled and highly profitable industry serving a captured, indeed captivated, audience. As an industry, it shows little sign of social conscience. It has no code of conduct. Governments do not seem to be exercised over social effects, except when faced with crimes which are attributed to video games, as in South Korea or Germany.

My second unabated concern is the effect on children. Many of the adults who are today impassioned devotees can trace the habit to their childhood. In adult use, games may be defended as a harmless diversion from the nega-