Your Games WILL Change the World! It's Your Choice How

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Founder, Culture Shock Games

We Are Chicago

- A week in the life of a teenager on Chicago's south side.
  - High school drama combined with the danger of gangs and violence

We Are Chicago

- But it's more than that...
  - Based on real stories and interviews
  - Hired a writer and artists from these neighborhoods
  - Supporting non-profits that are working in Chicago
  - Increase empathy and educate people about what it's like to live in these neighborhoods
  - ...now you sound a lot like a "social change" game...

For the next 25 minutes:

- Convince you that your game is a "social change" game.

- Think about how the situations I'm describing can apply to your current project or any of your previous projects.

What are we going to talk about?

- Lessons learned from demoing We Are Chicago at PAX Prime and Indy PopCon
  - 2 positive observations
  - 1 ...not so positive... observation

- Why these lessons apply to your game regardless of the game you're making.

- Show me the science!

- Questions

Lesson #1: Better representation means a lot

We Are Chicago at Conventions

- Everyone was very positive

- People from the south side were very excited about how accurate the game was

- The majority of people played our entire 20-25 minute demo.

What else did they say?

- Talked a lot about Watch Dogs and GTA

- Disappointment with Watch Dogs in particular because it claimed to be Chicago

- Frustration at the portrayals of people of color in both Watch Dogs and GTA

How does this apply to me?

- Your game may say something about a different issue.

- For We Are Chicago, we focus primarily on issues around race

Great example: Aurion

Lesson #2: Respectful representation encourages discussion

- Random conversations at PAX and PopCon

- Gamers at a gaming event having a discussion about race, economic opportunities, normalizing violence

- These conversations wouldn't be happening in these settings without our game.

- Proves that games have an impact and can shape discourse.

Discussions lead to more interest in the game

- The discussions worked both ways:

  - Our game educated people and started discussions

  - Those discussions brought other people back to the booth

Now for the bad news...

- Racism is still a problem in gaming communities.

- People feel very safe openly expressing it.

Some quick anecdotes from our experiences

- "Why make games about black people? There are already so many."

- "I wasn't playing as a black character in [Telltale's] The Walking Dead."

Lee from The Walking Dead

Casual racist jokes and comments

- More than once kids would make a racist joke or comment while walking past our booth

- The ones who sat down to play would consistently express more nuanced statements about the characters after playing

Okay, prove it!

- Using an Avatar-Based Simulation to Train Families to Motivate Veterans with Post-Deployment Stress to Seek Help at the VA
  - Kognito games - https://www.kognito.com/products/ptsd/research/

  - "…an effective tool…"

  - "…**79% of family members** approached their veteran to **discuss their concern** after completing the training…"

  - "…**22% of veterans** who were approached by a family member that completed the training **started to receive mental health treatment within the 1-month study period**…"

That was a health "game"...

- The Effects of Prosocial Video Games on Prosocial Behaviors: International Evidence from Correlational, Longitudinal, and Experimental Studies
  - http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2678173/

  - "...the strongest case possible for establishing that the effects of video games...are causal is when **well-designed experimental, correlational, and longitudinal studies** yield converging evidence (called triangulation). Furthermore, when a set of such studies includes **diverse populations** (different ages, sexes, cultures) and **different measurement approaches**, the degree of reasonable generalization broadens tremendously. **The present studies satisfy all of these criteria**."

  - "Likewise, video games can have **both positive and negative effects**. **Content matters**, and **games are excellent teachers** (Gentile & Gentile, 2007). **Violent content in video games can lead people to behave more aggressively**. **Prosocial content, in contrast, can lead people to behave in a more cooperative and helpful manner.**"

That was probably just a few studies…

- Video Games Do Affect Social Outcomes: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Effects of Violent and Prosocial Video Game Play
  - http://psp.sagepub.com/content/40/5/578.abstract

  - "Data from **98 independent studies** with **36,965 participants** revealed that for both violent video games and prosocial video games, there was a **significant association with social outcomes**. "

  - "Whereas **violent video games increase aggression** and aggression-related variables and decrease prosocial outcomes, **prosocial video games have the opposite effects. These effects were reliable** across experimental, correlational, and longitudinal studies, indicating that **video game exposure causally affects social outcomes** and that there are both **short- and long-term effects**."

Cooperative vs competitive

- Violent Video Games and Reciprocity: The Attenuating Effects of Cooperative Game Play on Subsequent Aggression
  - http://crx.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/09/26/0093650214552519.abstract

  - "**Cooperative games resulted in less aggression** between video game partners (Experiment 1) and between non-video game partners (Experiment 2) **than did competitive or stand-alone games.**"

- Ingroup Versus Outgroup Conflict in the Context of Violent Video Game Play: The Effect of Cooperation on Increased Helping and Decreased Aggression
  - http://crx.sagepub.com/content/41/5/607.abstract

  - "The main findings corroborate previous research on **the beneficial effects of cooperative game play** and suggest **playing cooperatively can increase helping behavior**. Furthermore, cooperation with an outgroup member can actually **reduce aggression**."

What does that mean for us as developers?

- Challenging racist ideas in the gaming audience is important and games like We Are Chicago are one way to do that

- At the same time, all games are effective at changing and informing discourse
  - Think about the GTA or Watch Dogs comments
  - Likely their portrayal was unintentionally effective in a detrimental way

- We can't assume that our audience is progressive or that our audience will interpret our choices the way we do

- We also can't assume they will understand or overlook "small" mistakes we make with representation
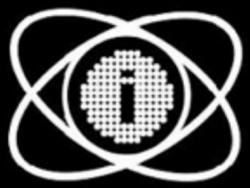
Design choices

- Competitive vs cooperative games

- High scores and money or currency as reward for winning

- Always playing the hero or being able to solve every problem
  - Meg Jayanth's talk "Unfair Game" at PRACTICE 2015

- Solving problems with violence
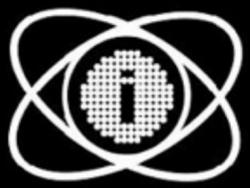
Okay…
Maybe I believe you…
…and all those scientists with their hundreds of studies and thousands of participants…

But how?

- Try to examine your own biases and preconceptions

- In most cases, you can't do this by yourself

- Make lots of friends with different backgrounds, life experiences, different ways of approaching problems, different ways of looking at the world, etc

What else?

- Collaborate with someone who has the background you're looking to share with the world

- If you can't hire or collaborate with someone, you can still share what you're working on with other people

- If you don't know anyone, welcome to GDC!
  - Lots of SIGs and Roundtables

Get feedback!

- Early and often!

- Listen to concerns about your representations and be willing to change things if people are offended

- Demographic groups are not monoliths

We're all indies though so…do I have an impact?

- On an indie scale
  - Think of it as a career long impact
  - Over your whole career you are likely to get your games collectively in front of over a million people
  - Even if the people who are strongly changed by your game are:
    - 1% of that total = 10,000 people
    - 0.1% of that total = 1,000 people
  - That's still a huge impact!
- Every decision you made changes how all those people experience your game and how they are impacted by it
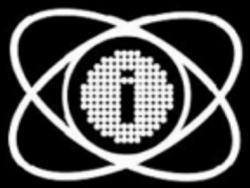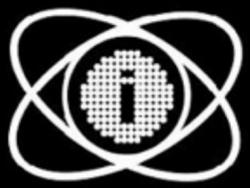
Planting a seed

- Most players will be influenced in some way

- Players may be challenged or validated in their world view

- Your game may contextualize an idea or a world view

Even bigger impact!

- We influence other indies

- AAA devs play indie games too!

- You have a huge and outsized impact on the world by making games!

Realize your power...and use it for good!

- Lots of people will connect with your ideas through your games!

- Remember that your games will have that impact whether you set out to or not.

- So make sure you're games are making the world a better place!

Thank You! Questions?

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Slides: http://WeAreChicagoGame.com/GDC2016.pptx

Talks you should go to!

Wednesday
10 Ways to Make Your Game More Diverse
LGBTQ+ and Women in Games SIGs

Thursday
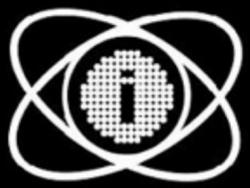The Current State of Muslim Representation in Video Games
Beyond Ageism: Designing Meaningful Games for an Older Audience
Blacks In Gaming and Serious Games SIGs

Friday
Game Accessibility SIG
Women in Games SIG Allies Roundtable

Further information

- Ta-Nehisi Coates
  - Between the World and Me, The Case For Reparations

- Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun by Geoffrey Canada

- There Are No Children Here by Alex Kotlowitz

- The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson

- The Interrupters, Documentary Film