Text 96 SOME DEVELOPERS OPPOSE VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES

A Tamil mother, recently immigrated to Canada, stirs biryani. Her young son looks on, sniffing the delectable aromas. This is a scene in Venba, a recently released video game attracting attention. Through a series of cooking puzzles—in which players learn to prepare ingredients in the correct order or work out the various items missing from recipes—it offers an emotionally intense family saga, serving up topics like immigration and identity, alongside Tamil food.

Unlike the noisy, big-budget productions that dominate gaming, Venba is peaceful and gentle. It cost less than $1m to make but quickly managed to break into the top-sellers on Steam, a PC gaming hub, sitting alongside rivals that cost as much as $100m. Venba is important, because it is part of a growing trend of non-violent games attracting both game developers and players. […]

Games that do not feature violence would have been impossible before. According to a gaming expert, only 300 peaceful games were created in the last 50 years. More than half of them came out in the past ten years.

Two factors are contributing to the rise of kinder, gentler games. One is a backlash by game designers. Many independent developers, who can choose their own projects, do not want to spend their careers designing games about killing. Job Stauffer who contributed to violent productions such as the “Grand Theft Auto” series, has started refusing to work on brutal or murderous ones. “We see media reports of mass shootings and wars day after day,” he explains. “I decided that I didn’t want to be a part of the problem, creating entertainment that involves firing rockets into buses,” he adds. […]

In these new games, players speak instead of killing each other. It is popular with parents who want to play games with their kids, but who don’t want to expose them to gore and violence. […]

When people think about gamers, they often picture them as male and on the cusp of puberty. Some are. But in reality, the average age of gamers is around 33, and about half are female. Wren Brier, a developer, says the tastes and preferences of women gamers have started to influence developers; many are looking for play where caring and friendship are on display, instead of shooting and domination. […]

However, the most lavish productions and biggest commercial successes in gaming still usually include slaughter. “As soon as we attach a certain dollar amount to a project, it’s like violence becomes as understood a feature as having graphics,” says Laralyn McWilliams, a game developer. She hopes this will change in the future, as more developers and gamers choose a side. But of the 20 top-selling premium games so far this year, 15 feature combat.

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