

Discuss



→ As the maker of Super Columbine Massacre RPG!, Danny LeDonne is one of the most controversial figures in gaming. Now, inspired by Joel Kornek, a survivor of the Dawson College shooting, his new documentary is set to open the debate once again...

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as it difficult to decide on your first project after Super Columbine Massacre RPG? What were your options?

This is a funny question for me because I'm constantly working on video projects. Of course, most of them never reach the visibility of *SCMRPG*, though in my estimation they're far more accomplished pieces of work. Some people paint me as an attention seeker who has only made a game with RPG Maker. That just isn't the case at all. *Super Columbine* is one part of a rather eclectic mosaic of creative output since late high school. I've never really stopped creating things. If I tried, I would probably go insane.

Why did you choose to make *Playing Columbine*?

In some sense, I would probably have made *Playing Columbine* even without the existence of *SCMRPG*. That must sound odd to you given that *Playing Columbine* is ostensibly about *SCMRPG*. However, *SCMRPG* is merely what I consider the "plot" of the film; the game's controversy acts as the backbone for the story. In actuality, *SCMRPG* functions to illuminate

larger themes that I have been interested in for some time – the very themes that compelled me to create the game in the first place.

The game functions as an example of unpopular free speech and thus invites reflection on the power, responsibility and limitations of the First Amendment. It serves as an example of an emergent form of artistic expression and underscores the challenges that a new medium must undergo before being embraced by mainstream culture. When the controversy around *SCMRPG* erupted in the summer of 2006, I knew I had the subject of a really good film on my hands; it served as a catalyst for so many issues that I cared about to begin with.

“The game functions as an example of free speech and thus invites reflections on power”

Danny LeDonne - SCMRPG Creator



Above: The tragic subject of the Super Columbine Massacre was always going to be a prime target for filmmakers.

Did you have any trouble getting interviewees for the project?

Not really. During the latter half of 2006 I was building contacts by paying attention to who else was quoted in the press about my game. Who really defended it? Who really criticised it? I tried to bring as many of those figures to the table as possible, travelling to festivals and conventions where many of these people would gather. As the story unfolded at Dawson College and Slamdance, I picked up new interviewees along the way, finally capping things off with a few interviews with the "heavy hitters" on the issue: ECA (Entertainment Consumers Association) president Hal Halpin, former ESA (Entertainment Software Association) president Doug Lowenstein, IGDA (International Game Developers Association) president Jason Della Rocca, Parents Television Council president Tim Winter and, of course, the one-and-only Jack Thompson.

It seems likely that this documentary would have brought you into contact with

people who didn't like SCMRPG. Has the process of making *Playing Columbine* changed your views in any way?

This film has been a really interesting exercise in attempting to understand other points of view. This was especially true when I edited together the interview with Roger Kovaks, for example. Roger was friends with one of the deceased from Columbine, Rachel Scott, and he talked at length about why he objected to *SCMRPG* and subsequently chose to search me out and post all my personal information online—clearly someone whose views and methods I disagreed with.

In terms of changing my own views, I think I am more convinced now than ever that *SCMRPG* isn't some shot in the dark or a doomed attempt at recharting the trajectory of serious games; as more and more developers create subversive, challenging work, this little conceptual island that my game lives on becomes less and less lonely.

How did your relationship with Joel Kornek begin?

Basically Joel emailed me in anger the day after the Dawson shooting because he had just been released from the hospital and was whipped into frenzy by the media about *SCMRPG*'s connection to the tragedy. I replied with candour and consideration—not the dismissive response he was expecting. We quickly became friends and began to discuss ways in which we could collaborate to prevent further shootings.

Had Joel made any assumptions about the intent behind *SCMRPG*? How did you address them?

Joel originally believed what the press told him: Kimveer Gill "trained" on a videogame about Columbine. Furthermore he heard a rumour that the same developer was making a game about the Dawson shooting even as his girlfriend remained

hospitalised. He later discovered all these things to be false—not so much on my accord but because he's a very smart, savvy guy who found in the aftermath of Dawson that the press tends to be rabid, sensational and clueless about these events. When he came around to realising that *SCMRPG* was actually pointing toward how reactionary society can be after a school shooting, Joel contacted me again and told me he understood my efforts.

What has he brought to the project?

Interviewees like Joel and Richard Castaldo (survivor of the Columbine shooting) bring an important level of validity to this film. Also, having younger people in the film is an attempt at bridging the generation gap; I checked out the documentary *Moral Combat* and though the film is a very skilfully crafted exploration of videogame violence, no one in the entire film is under 30! So often we find the village elders gathering around on cable news, talking about young people as though they were some exotic species that can't be caught on tape. Young people have a voice, too—and often times it is a sagacious one.

Super Columbine was greeted with a mix of both admiration and outrage. Do you expect *Playing Columbine* to be controversial?

There will always be press eager to create controversy around a work of art because that is one of the basic functions of commercial journalism. Where there is a modicum of disagreement there is readership and revenue. Inasmuch as the film is about controversy itself, I suppose it will inevitably be seated in it. However, much like *SCMRPG*, the goal has never been controversy for its own sake. Every interviewee in the film says some level-headed things and I doubt audiences will walk out of the theatre thinking this film was designed to make their blood boil. →

(BANNED IN GERMANY)

→ German censorship is notoriously tough, and the following games all had to be edited or withdrawn at the behest of the USK ratings board



CRACKDOWN

A visionary game it may be, but due to the supposed unnecessary violence against innocent civilians it contains, Realtime Worlds' *Crackdown* is unavailable in Germany. By this reasoning, any game with emergent play will run the risk of being excluded.



GEARS OF WAR

While millions of people sat before their televisions, bathing in the might of Epic, *Gears Of War*'s infamous chainsaw and unrelenting bloodshed alerted the attention of the German censors. The biggest game of the next gen at that point was out of reach.



DEAD RISING

Despite an overwhelmingly comic tone, and the fact that everyone you're harming is, in fact, already dead, the German board felt that grown adults couldn't be trusted to enter Capcom's infested shopping mall. Our Xbox 360's would be poorer without it.



FAR CRY

It would eventually be released with major changes, but the ragdoll physics on show in Crytek's seminal FPS were a little too 'on the money' for German tastes. In retrospect, and from a UK standpoint, this decision is utterly absurd.



CLIVE BARKER'S JERICO

Granted, *Jericho* won't win any awards for originality, but for a game so clearly pitched as a horror and squarely aimed at horror fans, we were surprised to see this fall foul of Germany's draconian standards. We'd have sold our console by now.

Discuss

→ The major problem for most filmmakers isn't so much production as actually getting their work distributed and shown. How are you approaching this?

I'm honestly not very concerned about getting distribution because in this day and age there are so many opportunities and venues to get your work out there. The film is going to make a run on the festival circuit, I will be looking into getting a distributor for DVD in the US market and perhaps if there is an interest I can make it available on a global basis. On top of all that, we are only a few years away from being able to distribute feature-length films in high resolution over the internet, after all.

There seems to be apathy among the gaming community. Their chosen hobby is run into the ground at every opportunity, and yet read the forums and the attitude is so dismissive. What are your thoughts?

This is a good question and one that my film addresses though not by overtly calling gamers apathetic. Truly I want to mobilise people who care about this pastime/career/medium of theirs to ask more of it—to make games more than children's toys by expecting/designing more from them.

Gamers have been too eager to blog online about how they think Jack Thompson is an idiot, yet he and others so often remain unchallenged in the public sphere, polluting the populace with the view that games are "murder simulators" and "train kids to kill." Half of America plays videogames and it is high time we represent ourselves. Across the globe, democratically elected governments are banning games outright. Wake up! This is a critical time because "protecting the children" has always been the gateway

Below *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* circulated the globe via the net, and LeDonne is confident that the film will receive coverage too.



rhetoric of authoritarians who want to censor free expression.

I suppose many people would have expected you to make another game. Do you have any plans to do so in the future?

I would love to make another videogame but it isn't currently in my future plans. Videogame design is that it is a very specialised, technical field (more so than filmmaking, certainly). Without middleware like RPG Maker, there would have been no

Columbine game. In all honesty, *SCMRPG* was the result of realising I could make a videogame without having any formal experience in game design. Should I come across software that inspires me to try it out (I've played around with electronic music in this manner upon being introduced to Fruity Loops), I just might make another game.

An extended clip of *Playing Columbine* can be seen at www.killthinking.com

Above LeDonne is an advocate of programs such as Middleware, which promote creativity and innovation in amateur game makers.

KILL THINKING

Joel Kornek narrowly survived the Dawson College shooting. After months of pain and confusion, he decided to take action with his powerful blog, Kill Thinking



How did the media reaction to the Dawson College shooting feel to you?

The media reaction to me seems to be a huge joke. These people in no way seem to realise the severity of what happened. To the media, a school shooting is just a massive headline, and I think that they are a part of the problem. The media has crossed the line between public knowledge and sensationalism, and school shooters now seem to be acknowledging the media attention. Look at Virginia Tech. Cho sent packages to NBC containing pictures and videos of him brandishing guns.

Was Kill Thinking your way of dealing with what happened?

It was definitely one of the most important ways for me to deal with what had happened to me. I woke up in November – two months after the Dawson shooting – and I had spent the last months of my life drinking and popping anti-depressants. I was on the edge of suicide and realised that I needed to pull myself out. I had the idea of turning what I had been through into something positive, and

the entire concept of an online help site for teens hit me almost instantly. I ran with it, and a few days later the site was opened.

How did you hear about Super Columbine Massacre RPG?

After Dawson, the media began printing headlines that Kimveer Gill, the Dawson shooter, had been obsessed with the game. I couldn't imagine that such a game even existed.

What was your reaction to it? Could you see the message behind it?

My initial reaction was that this game was horrible. I didn't take a second to see what it was all about, it became the immediate scapegoat for what had happened to me.

How did your relationship with Danny Ledonne begin?

My relationship with Danny actually started with a very angry email on my part:

"I am not blaming your videogame for what happened, but honestly, man, if you have a shred of humanity left inside your body, you would take it off the internet. I know that for you it

is only for educational purposes, or whatever you call it, but if you only knew what your game was partly responsible for.

I saw Gill standing in front of me. He loaded his guns and then fired at the floor, then fired on me and my girlfriend. Doctors have told us that we are lucky to still be alive. I have six gunshot wounds in my body. I ran for cover while this psycho continued ravaging the school. How can you tell me that your game didn't give him the idea to do this, or even inspire him to go there?"

Danny wrote back the next day apologising and explained the game to me. We began corresponding by email, and he was even the first person that I bounced my ideas for Kill Thinking off.

Have your views changed as a result of knowing Danny?

My views on the game have definitely changed. Danny and I have had several discussions on the impact of videogame violence, and I am now convinced that there is a lot more that drives someone to shooting a school than playing videogames.



FROM THE FORUM

Are Gamers Too Apathetic?

Posted by: Bob Syko

Well, I can hardly blame gamers for not getting passionate about games. The whole *Resident Evil* thing left us branded as racists by a lot of people. Not just the people that were being racist either. All of us. This was something a lot of us got passionate about and it was either dismissed as people being silly or branded as racist.

Posted by: Hendo

I agree. Gamers can't win. When a fuss is kicked up, we're made to look like spoiled kids, and if we don't we're apathetic.

Posted by: Somerset Bumpkin

There are more important things in life than games, and they are meant to be a fun diversion from reality and nothing further. A comparison with film does the medium no favours. Gaming should be allowed to grow in its own time.

Posted by: Robo-robot

I'm very passionate about games as a medium and will defend them whenever and wherever possible, but the media-induced hysteria surrounding 'controversial' games makes mature discussion with anyone that is not a gamer themselves almost impossible. With this in mind it's no wonder we appear apathetic.

Posted by: rumblecat

In terms of defending games, yes, there's huge apathy. I'm still surprised by how many people accepted the ban on *Manhunt 2* in this country. There was the absurd notion that Rockstar somehow deserved this for past transgressions. Even more perplexing was the idea that 'it's only one game'. The principle behind letting a governing body decide what art/entertainment is suitable for adults to consume remains the same. It's about defending the individual's right to choose.

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