Sex, Violence and the In-between:
Bikini Beach Zombie Massacre

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Bikini Beach Zombie Massacre was designed as a critique of the tensions between sex and violence in digital games. It was created as a part of the Critical Gameplay project. The project is an ongoing effort to create alternate play experiences that critique the conventions of digital play. The games in the collection are designed to reevaluate player perspective on gameplay experiences. They are offered as social critique demonstrating that conventional play is riddled with its own problems, complications and assumptions. Bikini Beach Zombie Massacre is unique to the 10 game collection in that it relies on conventional mechanics, but unique content. The game contains a collection of sexual images, innuendo and cultural references that are explicitly sophomoric and hyper-masculine.

History and Context

The history of computer games can be told as an intersection of geek culture and gender domination (Fron et al. 2007). It can also be told as a medium finding its place in an evolving media space (Demaria & Wilson 2002). To understand the impetus behind Bikini Beach Zombie Massacre it is useful to consider as both. Computer games did evolve out of a computer science culture which had been male dominated. Games also developed out of a commercial media space which was shy to enter sexual spaces save for a few outliers like Custer's Revenge (Mystique 1982).

While the taboo section of digital play has embraced sexual content in games, these games are not to be played in public in the America's, Asia, parts of Europe and other large video game consuming areas. The

result is a bias toward the innuendo of play. Lara Croft, of the enormously popular Tomb Raider franchise, can moan seductively as long as she is not depicted in a sexual situation (Brown 2008). As the rule of thumb reads, sexual suggestion is fine, sexually explicitly is not.

Sexual content in digital play is largely considered taboo, reserved for the dark alleys of the Internet. It is to be explored in private and never mentioned in polite company. This is somewhat true of the academic analysis of such work as well. To do such research is to admit that the researcher has spent much time in the digital equivalents of red light districts, brothels and sketchy alley. There are easier ways to further one's career and understand games, sex and society.

It is instead more important, as championed by numerous publications to study violence [Dill & Dill 1999]. This novelty is indicative of an alarming set of values. That which is natural, is too private to play in public. That which is unnatural, is to be hidden. To have sex is a natural part of the propagation of the species. To kill, do harm or violence seems less essential. Yet, the tolerated standard in commercial digital play is just the opposite. Those games that are most taboo are not the most violent, they are the most sexual. As evidence, consider the result of Grant Theft Auto's Hot Coffee mod (Brown 2008, 135), which allowed players to have sex with their girlfriend. Upon its discovery every copy of the game was pulled from the shelves. The same cannot be said for games which allow players to rip hearts from chests or dislocate spines from bodies. The general social tolerance for the fantasy of violence over the fantasy of sex is a strange dichotomy.

It is this strange dichotomy that inspired the creation of the Bikini Beach Zombie Massacre, also released as Bikini Zombies, Day at the Beach. The questions which inspired its creation were simple. Are mobile games exempt from this dichotomy of values because there are fewer levels between the developer and consumer? How much sexual content will the two largest marketplaces allow? What sort of market is there for such games?

The production of media that live at the edge of sexual tensions between marketplace limits and consumer demands is not new. As such, the game's design draws from the history of sexploitation film and the grindhouse theater. It's content cues, description and images are all informed by the tradition of sexually explicit films. Just as the film industry wrestled with

understanding how much sexual content is too much, it seems reasonable to ask the same of games. It is a particularly apt question to ask during the growth of the mobile platform. Where once a patron interested in watching sexual content would need to walk into a Grindhouse theater to enjoy a film, the growth of personal home entertainment (e.g. video cassette recorders) moved that experience to their home. It is this idea of personal home entertainment that resonates with the potential of mobile games. While the personal computer has become a personal entertainment device, mobile devices are a step further into the personal. They are with their owners more often than personal computers and the often hold more of their owner's secrets.

Drawing from this history of Grindhouse Theaters, the notion of grindhouse games seems apparent. Games have matured in complexity, structure, and distribution. When compared to film games have far to go in the formalization and standardization of content analysis. Where the film industry standardized its rating system as a purported customer service, digital games have yet to appropriately standardize this task. The ESRB has criteria, but their approach is episodic. They simply evaluate developer provided scenes that are representative of the games content [Hanninger & Thompson 2004]. More importantly, mobile games have a much simpler distribution network which attempts to be market driven. In its purest form, the ideal is that mobile game marketplaces are lead by the explicit entertainment needs of the players. Although this is not true in practice, the concept is idealized to mean that the many layers of developers, publishers and retailers are eliminated and reduced to a simple developer-player model. Before this model develops into a more complicated solution, it seemed wise to experiment with consumer demand.
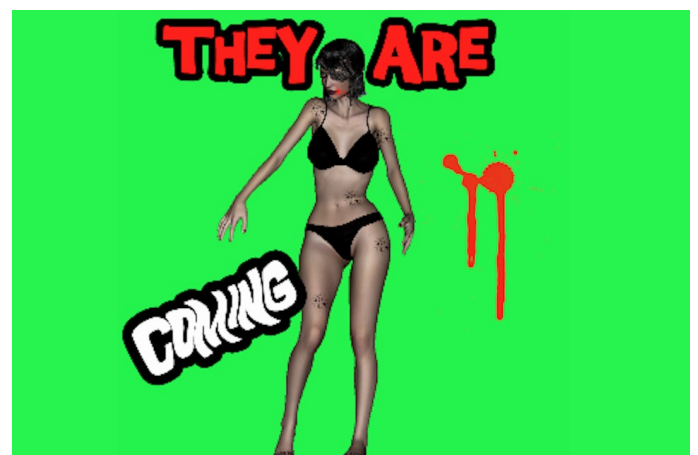
The Content

Bikini Beach Zombie Massacre attempts to incorporate several common sexual tropes in ways that actively undermine the distributor's criteria. This practice is analogous to filmmakers of the 1980's and 1990's who made straight to VHS movies with gratuitous sexual content. Some of these distributors managed to find themselves on the shelves of the major distributors of the time, like Hollywood Video and Blockbuster companies with an established history of censoring the content on their shelves.

The game is designed to violate sexual content taboos by playing on the cultural tropes instead of the explicitly forbidden. In this way this game was also envisioned as a kind of revolt. It is an engineered protest. The game mechanics are convention for a top down shooter. The player must walk the beach destroying zombie in bikinis as they approach. There are 16 levels, with a sexual innuendo cut scene between. The cut scenes depict a full screen bikini clad zombie and a phrase of sexual connotation. The cut scenes phrases read; they are coming, they nibble flesh, never enough, unquenchable, never turn your back.

During gameplay the player must reload their gun to continue shooting. To do so, they must shake their device up and down. When the gun is reloaded the game shows an image of a seemingly naked woman for a millisecond.

The images are randomly generated from a set of 10 images, all of which fall within the guidelines of Apple's and Google's specifications for nudity. Careful examination of the images will illustrate that the 3D render does not depict nudity, simply flesh colored surfaces. This subliminal content is never described explicitly, although the game is given a mature rating as part of publication.

When players play the game they are shooting a big black gun, which has specific connotations to a penis. The gun shoots three tear shaped bullets, designed to look like pixilated sperm.

The game's audio also has sophomoric sexual reference. The sound of Zombies rising is a slowed woman's moan from a pornographic movie. When non-player characters are hit by bullets they produce a male's moan. The concept was to produce an aural experience which sounds like a back and forth between a man and a woman having sex.

The game does allow players to earn money, but there is never a moment for them to spend it.

The Release

Bikini Beach Zombie Massacre is provided as a completely free game on Google Play and for $.99 USD on the Apple App Store. The game received an average of 30 downloads a day without any app promotion. The game's lure is simply a few non-explicit game screenshots, a title and its English language description.

Sales on Apple's App Store allowed it to land on daily charts based on App Annie reported data shown below.

Daily rank highs on Apple devices were reached in South Korea (#97 in all Games), Switzerland (#167 in Arcade Games), China (#455 in Arcade games), Taiwan *#457 in Arcade Games), and Thailand (#432 in Arcade Games). Other countries in which it ranked in the top 1000 are Spain, Italy, Luxembourg, Canada, Japan, Israel, United

States, Indonesia, and New Zealand in rank order of sales.

The free game has never ranked on Google Play. In the game's one year history, it has received an average rating of 3 stars on Google Play, with 4,577 installations. Less than 10% of players keep the game on their device for more than 2 weeks. The ten countries who's players downloaded the game the most on Google Play were Taiwan, United States, Mexico, Brazil, China, Russian Federation, Italy, Germany, and South Korea (in rank order).

Since players on Google Play did not keep the game it is likely that they had their curiosity sated upon play. Such details are not as readily available for the Apple App Store. It is also fair to assume that people who did not keep the game did not like it or did not want such a juvenile game discovered on their device.

Conclusion:

The game was created as an experiment in censorship, sex and violence. The game was designed and distributed as an experiment in critical gameplay and discomfort design. Part of the research was to understand how much sexual content could be embedded in the game before the two largest distributors of mobile games, Google Play and Apple's App Store, would prevent the game. The short answer is that despite policy potentially restricting such content, overt sexual content is much more easily banned than the content embedded in this game. The game exists as critique and will remain on the store as long as distributors tolerate it. It may serve to spark the intellectual curiosity of others, or invite developers and consumers to ask questions about playful sexuality, critical gaming, or simply about the absurdity of such games.

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