

The Future of Console and Computer gaming.

Today gaming is one of the biggest entertainment industries with billions of dollars in revenue supporting thousands of workers. Computer gaming reaches into almost every American home in one form or another and the consumers of games represent a wide and diverse section of America including men and women, adults and children, casual and professional. With the growing popularity of computer games it's increasingly important to make sure the consumer has the rights and technical means to avoid censorship and monopolistic practices.

In July 1938 the eight largest movie production companies were taken to court over antitrust laws. The Supreme Court eventually ruled that the major studios' ownership of the means of production, theaters, and the film distribution network was a violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act which requires the United States federal government to investigate and pursue trusts, companies, and organizations suspected of violating monopoly laws. Big movie studios would produce movies, show the movies in their movie studios throughout the country, and then use this leverage to force privately owned movie theaters to buy a year's worth of content in order to show any of the studios' movie regardless of quality. This draws parallels with gaming companies today in many ways. The large gaming companies own the means of production, a few own and design the consoles these games are played on, and increasingly they are gaining control of the means of distribution through online distribution and direct sales.

Gaming companies are starting to become monopolistic with their practices. They control both the means of production and, increasingly, are gaining control of the means of distribution. With video games becoming more and more popular computer gaming companies have been looking for ways to increase their profits. One way of doing this is re-releasing games that they already made. What if you already own the game? Because of gaming companies' policy of upgrading console and system requirements every few years, you either have to buy the game again for a newer system, download it from their online distribution system, or play it on a gaming console that might not work. With the introduction of software such as Valve's Steam and EA's Origins Platforms, gaming companies are starting to shift from physical media such as CDs and DVDs to just delivering the game via one of these privately owned distribution channels.

Known to few people, while agreeing to the terms of service for these distribution channels, customers agree to reduced rights sometimes including giving the company the right to delete or disable the game or features in the game as they see fit. This has a negative effect on the gaming industry because it shifts all the rights of ownership from the person who bought the game to the person who delivers it, effectively shifting the transaction from a purchase to a lease.

Some positive effects of not having a few big companies controlling the video game industry include improved quality through competition, more reasonable prices for the consumer, artistic integrity, and the ability for lesser known programmers and video game studios to break into the video game market.

Video Games are also under attack from people and groups seeking to censor the content. Just like with books in the early part of the century, laws are being passed to limit distribution of certain games. It is understandable that some content should be restricted from certain age groups but to stop an adult from purchasing a video game they feel is worth their hard earned money is unacceptable. This equates to censorship, and as we have seen with books, this is never a good thing. Australia currently bans certain video games including the popular video game "Grand Theft Auto" for a variety of reasons including what it sees as the promotion of violence and other illegal activity. Governments have been criticized for banning games for many reasons including such bans violate rights, increase piracy, inhibit business opportunities, and that users can still purchase or download such games online.

Alternative sources of games are, for the most part, not accessible to the general public. From a development point of view, alternatively made games are not as consistent in quality and releases because they are made by people on their own free time with little or no financial backing. Due to these restrictions alternately sourced video games are not widely anticipated by most. What could make alternatively sourced games more consistent and widely known? One thing that could help is making the game available to as many people as possible, which means making it available on multiple systems and selling it at a reasonable price, maybe even letting the consumer pay what they feel the game is worth.

Ever since the inception of video game consoles gaming companies have used the "upgrade to more profits" strategy, where people are forced to upgrade to a new gaming console and buy all new games for that console because most new gaming systems are not backwards compatible. Game reselling is a solution because it allows people to buy used video games and video game consoles at a reasonable price from a third party. In order for game reselling to become a long term viable means of collecting and saving video games, emulators specifically open source emulators must gain traction. An emulator is software that allows video games exclusive to one system to be played on another. For example a PlayStation 2 exclusive video game could, in theory, be played on a PC using an emulator. Open source emulators pose a threat to large video gaming companies because they allow the consumer to "truly own" the content they purchase.

As one of the biggest entertainment industries, which brings in billions of dollars in revenue, supports thousands of workers, and has enough influence to reach into almost every American home in one form or another, it's increasingly important to make sure computer game consumers have the rights and technical means to avoid censorship and monopolistic practices. If we make sure consumers have these rights we will insure the technical quality and artistic credibility of past and future video games. This also insures that consumers can truly own the content they purchase.