

*Press Start*

Will



Videogames, to say the least, have been a significant part of my life, whether or not I'd like to admit it. The amount of time I've played games is so large that I would be embarrassed to write about how long. (I do have some numbers of how long and it is staggering.) I received my first *Gameboy* when I was 6-years-old from my father right before my first trip to Japan. He showed me a day before the plane-ride how it worked and the basics of using it. It was a faded blue, with two double A batteries and plenty to replace the dead ones I would surely have spent up. I was infatuated. Honestly, at the time, I was probably more excited to play the game than go on the actual trip itself. I waited impatiently at the gate for the flight, ecstatic for the moment I could board the plane and to get the first taste of playing a video game. Once I boarded the flight and began playing it's all I did. I didn't sleep on the flight. I played. For fourteen hours I stayed up; my parents said by the end of the flight my eyes were completely bloodshot from watching the dancing images across the screen.

The simple handheld could not satiate my irresistible hunger for more games. So, upon learning that my friend Nicholas had received the newest console from *Nintendo*, the *Gamecube*, I just HAD to have it. All the cool kids had it and boy did I want it! If you didn't own the new console within a few months of release, you were considered behind in the social scene. So I did what any elementary student would do...I begged. I begged and begged in hopes that when Christmas rolled around it would be under the tree in anticipation of being opened. I didn't sleep well Christmas Eve; I lay jittery in bed, filled with a nervous energy. The next morning I awoke at an ungodly hour, begging for my parents to rise up from their uncaffeinated slumber. Much to my dismay, they took longer than I wanted to descend the staircase to make themselves a hefty cup of coffee to begin their long day. Once the opening of presents began I tore through the wrappers in search for my long awaited *Gamecube*. But it didn't come. By the time all the presents were opened none had been the gift I had hoped for so desperately. I was, to say the least, heartbroken. Disappointed and almost on the point of tears, I rose up slowly to walk towards the kitchen. But I heard a voice from behind me call out, "Wait Will! There's still a present here for you and Megan" (My sister). I lunged upon the present like a hawk, with the smallest glimmer of hope that it was *the* present I had so desperately sought. It was. The box displayed the glossy image of the purple cube, with the boxy letters in the upper left corner stylishly saying, "*Gamecube*."

The first two games I owned on the *Gamecube* were "Super Mario Sunshine" and "Mario Kart Double Dash." "Mario Sunshine" was for my sister while "Mario Kart" was for me. "Sunshine" was one of the stranger twists of a game franchise I have probably ever played to this day. The concept and goal of the game was to go around with a hose connected to a water tank on Mario's back, cleaning up graffiti that came alive to hurt you. Thinking about it now, it seems like a PR campaign by *Nintendo* to get kids thinking that graffiti is bad from an early age. But I digress; it has been to this day one of my all time favorites. It's what I consider to be a timeless classic, in the sense that its graphics may be behind the AAA games of today, but it still has that wonder in it. I revisit it every couple of years with the same joy I had experienced the first time through. Maybe it's just the power of nostalgia at work.

A few years passed and, as with any part of the technology market, video game consoles were constantly being outdated by the newer fancier machines. Upon a visit to Toys R' Us for the newest *Pokemon* game, I had a terrible revelation. It was for the new handheld the DS, it wasn't for my outdated *Gameboy*! The DS was much like the *Gameboy*, except it had more major differences; it had a SECOND screen and it was a touchpad! This sent my young mind into a tizzy realizing the possibilities and advantages a second screen could make on my gaming

experience. I went home to dig through my little combination safe underneath my bookshelf, in search for the \$140 I could scrape together to purchase my new gaming device. I did some trading with my sister for the proper gift cards and I ended up with enough money to pay for my new handheld. Within the same week I dragged my mom out and left with a DS. The new *Pokemon* game was a big disappointment. Pokemon racing...what a dumb idea.

Whenever I visited my friends' house his dad was always playing the game "World of Warcraft." It was so fascinating to me, so alluring. I asked my parents over the course of a couple of years to play the game, but they never would let me. They always claimed they had heard the stories about how addicting it was and they were worried that it would impact my grades. I was shocked that one evening at dinner that they finally told me I could try the game. My father paid for the monthly subscription and I dove into the game creating an "Undead" (basic the equivalent to a zombie) rogue. At the time, the game was still in its beginning stages, so there weren't many resources on how to actually play. I was completely lost and confused, wandering around but I was enjoying myself. With so much to do, there's almost a bliss to it. Many players consider the time I began playing in the "Golden Age" of "World of Warcraft"—when the player didn't really understand what they were doing, but they still enjoyed it wholeheartedly.

The enjoyment for the game didn't last forever, not because of the game going down in quality; it was due to outside factors. People at my middle school seemed to enjoy making a target out of me, for playing a simple video game, much to my embarrassment. One boy in particular took it above and beyond the "call of duty" to try to get beneath my skin. I remember it started when he was standing next to me in line for the buffet at lunch. I was loading up my plate, silently peering over the lunch tables in search of where my friends were seated. He stepped up right next to me and we had an exchange I won't soon forget. He asked me if I played the game "World of Warcraft" and I replied, sheepishly, that I did. He went on to say that his brother played for a time but in that time he lost all his friends, and failed out of school. For a 6th grader to hear this it was quite disturbing, hearing that playing a video could so directly correlate with having your life fall apart. I was already feeling a bit uncomfortable, but he continued. He talked about how some who played the game became depressed and took attempts at their own lives. I was horrified and scurried off to sit down with my friends.

I wished that it had just been a one-time event, but it was not. He continued to approach me and fill me with disturbing facts, and the supposedly inevitability that my life would end due to a video game. After weeks of the torment, in my Spanish class I broke down. I just couldn't take it anymore and I began sobbing. I hate crying in public places so this only worsened the crying. The teacher pulled me out of class and asked what was wrong and I explained the whole situation. This teacher downright adored me, for I reminded her of her son, so once I told her everything I could see the embers of hatred burning within her eyes. I went home early and the next day upon arriving to school, in the main entrance stood the boy and his mother. She was a very traditional woman, stern and to the point. She apologized profusely for her son's behavior and made him apologize to me. He did, but I could tell he wasn't genuine about it...making me detest him more.

This event and others led to me having a fear of conversing with people I didn't know about playing videogames. It still continued today and has grown into other mediums, such as *Manga* and the card game I play, *Magic the Gathering*. I've been teased and made fun of for doing all of these hobbies, and it's led me to have a closed off mindset, with sharing the fact that I dabble in them. It has gotten better has kids begin to grow up but I'm still on edge about

sharing it at times. Videogames are, without a doubt, moving out of the darkness of one's basement, becoming a more accepted hobby, but it still has a somewhat negative stigma surrounding it.

One game that I had no issue talking about was "Minecraft." My friend Nathan originally told me about the game "Minecraft," telling me that I would enjoy the creative aspect of it. I bought the game and began playing when only around 10,000 people had purchased it. By the time I left it had grown to over 7 million players. It's a pretty simple concept, sort of like *Legos* (the video game), but I think that's why so many of my friends liked it. We all played together and it was like playing *Legos* long distance. We didn't have to go to each other's house to play and by the time "Minecraft" had come out, we were FAR too old to be playing with *Legos* (by societal standards). In addition, *Legos* are quite expensive. With "Minecraft" there was no limit to our creation and building.

Everyone played "Minecraft" at my elementary school...and I mean *everybody*. We played it during lunch and then when we got home, we would all be playing it together until it was time to go to bed. We even joined a server in which you could play online with others. It got to the point where our server was one of the best known servers in the game, but it didn't last forever. Once high school came around, we lost touch and the server was shut down.

My parents never let me play violent videogames when I was younger. My first mature game (for players 17+), I received when I was about 13. "Halo 3," a multiplayer sci-fi shooter that was the supposed conclusion of the wildly popular series. Sadly, that didn't actually turn out to be true and now they're just milking the cow. This was another game where everyone was playing, especially at an all-boys' school. Fancy graphics, cyborg suits, aliens and lasers, what more can boys ask for! On the weekends I'd even play with many classmates that weren't really my friends. That's the power of a videogame; they bring people together. We all had each others' profiles and there was always somebody to play with. It became a big social event. 16 out of the 40 person class would play together, battling virtually.

As I went into high school I began to appreciate the independent gaming genre. A genre in which the studios that produced the games were not tied to a large company; they were often run by a small team. Most are known for their artistic nature and are often outliers compared to the blockbuster games. One such example of an Indie game is the hit, "Faster Than Light." You take the role of ordering crew members of a spaceship around outracing rebels on your heels, trying to escape to your homebase. One thing that the game is known for is its level of difficulty. I've been playing it for a couple of years and I've never beaten it once. It has the arcade game methodology of permadeath. When you die in the game, you're dead. No savepoints, no save progress, nothing. When you're dead, you're dead. Also, the encounters with the enemy ships are completely random, so some games right as you're starting, you run into a strong enemy ship. It's unforgiving in every sense, but that's why I love it so much. It's truly an accomplishment if you beat it, giving you supreme bragging rights over your friends. I need to take constant breaks from playing it, or else I'll just get too damn frustrated. Who wants to lose all the time? In small doses, it's fantastic, but I could, in no way, see myself playing it constantly.

Whether it be books, television, games or movies, my favorite genre consistently is either sci-fi or fantasy. So, when a friend told me about the game "Mass Effect," where you're the brave Commander Shepard of the Federation, zooming across the galaxy saving the universe. I was hooked. My first attempt to get the game was when I was a lot younger, "Mass Effect" was deemed too inappropriate for me, by the games salesperson. So, I waited a few years and bought the game. It's a role-playing game, where your decisions matter. You control a spaceship called

the Normandy, where you go around the galaxy solving missions of the utmost importance. You choose who is in your squad and how you interact with said squad members. It's the only game that I can think of, that when you're being interviewed by a reporter, there's an option to get in a fistfight with her. The game is tailored to your play style and you can either be rebellious and dastardly or a goody-two-shoes. I was mesmerized. I took the game so personally that if decisions didn't turn out my way, I'd be disappointed and crestfallen.

"Mass Effect" fell out of my field of view after a time until my Sophomore year of high school. I transferred into a Sign Language class with all Freshmen since I was beginning to fail Spanish. I didn't know any of them and I struck up conversation with one of the freshmen girls sitting next to me. She was quiet and reserved; talking with her didn't get anywhere. A couple of weeks passed and I noticed during one class that she was wearing a mass effect jacket. I thought to myself, "No way. She plays 'Mass Effect'?!?" So, I struck up a conversation with her, asking if she played. Her eyes lit up like fireworks. Out from this quiet girl came this explosion of energy. I said proudly how I played through the game a couple of times, smugly smiling. She just laughed, "I've played all 3 games 8 times." Wait. Eight times. If you try and suck in all the information and story, it would take most players 30 hours to do a full play through. We began to talk more and play "Mass Effect" with each other, just generally geeking out about the story. Over time, she became one of my best friends and, eventually, my girlfriend.

So, all and all, video games have had a massive impact upon my life. Being able to talk to a game maker this weekend down in San Francisco really gave me a great outlook on it. The meeting really reinforced the dream of becoming a game designer. Unlike 20 years ago, where it was almost impossible to work independently, now it's a booming business. Games have helped me make friends, unwind and even get a girlfriend. They've helped sculpt me into who I am, and who I am going to become. I'm a videogame geek to the core.