

IN VIDEO GAME ABOUT CHICAGO VIOLENCE, PLAYERS WIN THROUGH EMPATHY, NOT GUNS

By: John Keilman, January 2, 2017

Chicago's bloodshed has been well chronicled by journalists, musicians and filmmakers aiming to understand its perpetrators and victims. Now this mission has shifted to a new medium.

A small North Side company is finishing a video game titled "We Are Chicago," in which players assume the character of a teenage boy in an unnamed city neighborhood. They guide him through his final week of high school as gang tensions and street violence threaten to upend his life.

"We Are Chicago" is part of a wave of video games that aim to provide more than shoot-'em-up thrills. Dubbed "empathy games," they lead players through wrenching real-life situations, exploring tough subjects in a new way.

Such ambition comes with a risk. Video games are rarely taken seriously as an art form or a means of communication, and their attempts to tackle serious topics can strike some as superficial or exploitative.

Michael Block, lead programmer of "We Are Chicago," said he understands the criticism but considers games to be a new way of exploring familiar territory.

If someone was making a documentary or writing a story about growing up on the South Side, no one would bat an eye," he said. "This is going in that same direction. We're not trying to make a game that's super fun. We're trying to make a game that's telling an important story, and trying to engage people in a subject they might not have experience with."

Block, 28, grew up in Sheboygan, Wis., and moved to Chicago to study at DePaul University. He and a friend created a retro-style zombie game called "Organ Trail," and Block said it did so well that he gained the financial freedom to try something different — making games with a positive social impact.

Volunteer work with an organization called the All Stars Project of Chicago led him to his subject. He was surveying residents of the Englewood neighborhood about the needs of their community when he heard stories he could scarcely believe.

"People were saying stuff that was completely, mind-bogglingly different from my experience living on the North Side," he said. "Everybody had one of those stories: They knew someone who had been jumped, who had been mugged, who had been shot."

As he gathered those accounts, he began to understand why a young person might be tempted to rely on guns and gangs for protection. He imagined how the stories could fit into a game, giving players a chance to confront the choices faced by someone living in a tough city neighborhood.

That kind of rapport is the idea behind empathy games, a phrase popularized by Montreal-based developer Vander Caballero. He said that while most video games empower players by stirring feelings of fear, ecstasy and rage, an empathy game is different.

"It's not about being strong and powerful," he said. "It's about succeeding by being weak — by being empathetic to other characters."

Caballero's "Papo & Yo" uses fantasy to explore the idea of growing up with a drug-addicted parent. Another game, "Papers, Please," captures the complexities of immigration by casting players as officials at a troubled border crossing.

The most celebrated empathy game is "That Dragon, Cancer," which came out earlier this year. Using low-fi animation, it puts players in the shoes of parents caring for a dying child. Reviewers called it a breakthrough for the medium.

"While it's far from the typical video game adventure, 'That Dragon, Cancer' is a reminder that games can be so much more than just wish-fulfillment power fantasies," Steve Tilley wrote in the Toronto Sun. "It's an important and unforgettable experience, full of pain, love and grace."

The genre still has its critics. Developer Anna Anthropy, a transgender woman whose game "Dys4ia" conveys the experience of hormone replacement therapy, later denounced the notion of empathy games in a blog post, saying true understanding can't be gained in a round of gaming.

"Being an ally takes work, it requires you to examine your own behavior, it is an

ongoing process with no end point," she wrote. "That people are eager to use games as a shortcut to that, and (as a) way to feel like they've done the work and excuse themselves from further educating themselves, angers and disgusts me."

Block was aware of such criticism when he began work on "We Are Chicago." To ground the game in the real world, he turned to writer Tony Thornton, 61, a longtime Englewood resident.

Thornton had never written for a video game before but quickly warmed to the assignment, creating scenarios based on things that had happened to him.

"(Block's) idea was to bring the experience to people like himself who knew nothing about it," Thornton said. "My job was to make sure it rang true. My name is attached to it. I don't want my neighbors, my friends, my family to think I betrayed a trust, to be tied to a game that did not reflect the reality of our existence."

The game version starts with a tense dinner at the home of Aaron, the teenage protagonist who serves as a first-person avatar. His mother expresses concern about his new friend — a young man whose brother has gang ties — and players must decide how to react.

It continues with a dangerous walk to school, where Aaron and a pal are jumped by gang members, but not every scenario is so treacherous. Aaron also competes in a school poetry slam and takes part in a family reunion.

Aaron is never armed and never has the option of fighting back. That passivity has frustrated some who have tested the game, Block said, but it's true to Aaron's character and reflects what Block heard in his research — that resisting on the street will get a person killed.



"Trying to message that kind of stuff to the player has been difficult," he said. "In (typical) games, you go around and shoot stuff because you can, because you're the hero of the story. That's not how it works in this situation."

"We Are Chicago" will be available early in 2017 via Steam, an online gaming platform. Although Block hopes it will appeal to people who enjoy narrative-style games and those curious about the lives behind the headlines, he said it might also help at-risk children.

Patrick Sabaitis of Reclaim Our Kids, a nonprofit that does anti-gang work in the schools of Northwest Indiana and Chicago, said the game could prove useful in classrooms. He tested an early version and said it demonstrates ways to get out of trouble without violence.

"It gives you the background of the urban community but it plays out the conflict resolution component," he said. "It helps them make more conscious decisions on the positive side."

There hasn't been much research on the effects of playing empathy games, but Iowa State University psychology professor Doug Gentile said the basic psychological principles of gaming are well established: Violent video games produce aggression, while "pro-social" games produce helpful behavior.

Given that, he said, a game in which players are induced to care about the characters' lives could end with a newfound sense of compassion.

"It's basic brain science," he said. "Whatever you practice, you get better at."