Hidden Nazi Mode
Anatomy of a Failure

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This essay is a companion piece to a small interactive fiction game I created called The Game Formerly Known as Hidden Nazi Mode*. You should be able to download it from wherever you got this document.*

1 Transparency

Computer games are now an integral part of our society. In the realm of entertainment, playing computer games has a legitimate place next to reading books, listening to music, playing board games and watching movies. Computer games are used for educational purposes in primary and secondary schools, where they supplement text books and educational videos. And in higher education, courses about computer games are now taught alongside more traditional courses on literature and the fine arts.

But there is one big difference between a computer game and any of these other media: computer games are not *transparent*. By this I mean that when you read a book, watch a movie, examine a board game or a statue, you know everything that is contained within the work. You may not understand everything, you may have missed hidden layers of meaning, but you can be certain that the book does not contain any words you have not seen, that the movie does not contain any scenes you have not seen. For a computer game, no such thing is true: some or most of the game's content may not have appeared to you even if you played it often and thoroughly.

This has everything to do with the triple nature of a computer program: it consists as source code, as binary, and as an interpreted program with which you interact. Let us make sure we understand these terms before we move on.

- The **source code** is the human readable code that the programmers

have created. If you look at the source code and you know the programming language, you can see exactly what the program will do in different circumstances. As source code, a computer program has the same transparency that a book or a movie has.

- The **binary** is the compiled code: the original human readable source code has been translated into a machine readable program. For an unaided human, a binary is not transparent. It is in theory possible to reverse engineer a binary and make it transparent again, but this is often exceedingly difficult and sometimes illegal. For practical purposes, a binary is not transparent.

- The **interpreted program**, as it appears on your screen, is what you will actually interact with as end user. The interpreted program is not transparent: if this is the only layer you have knowledge of, you can never be sure that you know what the program will do in different circumstances, and you can never be sure that you have seen all the content the program has to offer.

If the end user does not have access to the source code of a computer game, that game is not transparent to that user. She cannot be sure what the game does. I will call such programs *closed games.*

2   Hidden Nazi Mode

Thinking about this, I realised that there is a certain danger inherent in the use of closed games in any situation where you are responsible for what someone else is playing. For instance: you teach a university level course about computer games. Many of the homework assignments require the students to play games chosen by you for their academic interest. As one of the students is playing a closed game you assigned, the screen suddenly fills with – whatever kind of inappropriate content you find most inappropriate. Such an occurrence would be very embarrassing. It could even get you fired.

The interesting thing is: you cannot prevent it. Playing the game yourself and finding no objectionable content is no guarantee that other interactors will not stumble upon such content. It might only appear once every 200 times; or only if the player is very bad (such as a non-experienced student might be); or only after the 17th of July 2011; or only when the username entered is 'Mary-Jane'; or only if the user's hard drive contains songs by Bon Jovi; or all of those together. If the game is closed, if you and others do not

have access to the source code, there is no way to be sure that such dubious content is not within the games you assign.

I am not, in fact, worried about this actually happening, but I *do* believe it is a good argument for preferring open games in classroom situations. (And also for children.) In order to make this point in a more dramatic way, I wrote a little game called *Hidden Nazi Mode*. In this game, you get to feed carrots to cute little bunnies – until you type "heil hitler", after which the game transforms into something infinitely less savoury. (The game did automatically stop itself before the worst happened, though.)

3   Failure

Unfortunately, *Hidden Nazi Mode* turned out to be a failure. Rather than it being a dramatic way to make the point that open games are more trustworthy than closed games, it was read by most of my testers to be a dramatic way to make the point that games are evil. Of course, I don't believe that games are evil; and I don't believe that *Hidden Nazi Mode* made that point. But the cultural context in which the game would have been released would have almost ensured misunderstanding. People, and especially those who live in the United States, are used to hear diatribes about the immorality of computer games, and to hear pleas for banning games. In such a context, few people will pick up the more subtle message of my piece. Most would read it as an argument for the banning of games.

But I don't want to ban games, and don't want to be read as advocating such a thing. I therefore decided not to release the game.

4   Fluffy Bunnies

But I still had a game sitting on my hard drive in which you could give carrots to little bunnies. Some people even liked it, as long as the hidden nazi mode was not invoked. (Some liked it as a children's game; others for the dark atmosphere created by its cultural hints.) So I have decided to take out all the Nazi stuff, rename the game to *The Game Formerly Known as Hidden Nazi Mode*, and release it.

And not only it, but also its source code. No worries, friends. This is an open game.