



, May 8, 2011 [<http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=2799>] by Anjin Anhut.

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Mortal Kombat, Censorship And The Dangers Of Online Distribution



To The Future

Mortal Kombat last friday got effectively put on the index here in Germany, which basically means that the game is no longer publicly available. If you are old enough, you are allowed to own it, though. I'm not going to elaborate on my opinion about the necessity or effectiveness of such laws or how much I feel disenfranchised as an adult.

I already owned the game before it became virtually unavailable (yeah, there is import, but that can also be deemed illegal in this case) and I am wondering if I still would be able to play it today, if I didn't bought a physical copy.

Yeah, today of course I would, but let's jump ahead a couple of years. Imagine retail basically dried up and extinct, all game content either playable on online browser based, client based or downloadable with an online key. As it is with such services, you don't actually buy a game, you don't own a game, you just buy a license to play it. Not too far of a jump, is it? All those services and technical conditions are already at place and are rapidly growing in popularity. Steam and Onlive, World of Warcraft, browser games, XBLA, it's easy and uncomplicated to use. Just log in, a bit of personal data and there you go, a whole catalogue of games to play for you instantly. Or think of less popular measures, like online DRM. Players using this services are no longer owning their games, they are only granted access.

Access Denied!

And this access, along with the content behind it, is totally under the control of the people you bought it from. If producers, publishers and distributors (furthermore referred to as providers) need to comply with regional laws and political pressure, which they do, what does this mean for the player, when he is only granted access to content he technically doesn't own? In the realms of online distribution this means that providers can be forced to withdraw, block and modify game content way after the purchase was made. And more concerning to me, it means that the lost content will technically be gone for good. There will be no original "copy" of the game out there, since the content gets edited or even erased at the source. Oh and don't get funny ideas, like making a copy of your own, thats prohibited also.

Censorship At The Source

This would be annoying for me as a customer, to have content I paid for changed and maybe taken away from me. Just imagine for a second your precious VHS Star Wars collection with the original theatre releases gets replaced with the lame digital remakes and the facepalm-inducing Hayden-Christensen-Ewan-McGregor-ghost ending. You would be pretty pissed and rightfully so.

What's actually way more dangerous in my view is the technical possibilities of infringement of freedom of speech, culture and information. There is laws, but there is also political pressure and financial pressure that can be utilized to force providers to modify content. While many games are superficial entertainment, meant to be a welcome distraction from real life, games can be a medium for expression and a medium of cultural relevance. Also in respect to other media like books, films and audio, it makes me kinda worried to think of a world where any published expression can be deleted at the source and therefore be gone for good.

Imagine a strong rap album, only available via services like Grooveshark, be retroactively censored, all the swear words bleeped out? Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, for you to read online on your tablet PC, [get's all the n-words removed?](#) Censorship happens and I'm not sure if relying only on online distribution wont give censors too much control over content.

As uncomfortable, unprofitable and unprogressive hard copy retail is, there is a case to be made for its ability to preserve content, culture and expression in its original state. We need a solution for this.

Any suggestions?

BTW: Those awesome censor dudes are of course from the game Psychonauts.

4 THOUGHTS ON “MORTAL KOMBAT, CENSORSHIP AND THE DANGERS OF ONLINE

DISTRIBUTION”



Kyle Blackston

on **June 16, 2011 at 5:06 pm** said:

DRM has always been a bother for me. I had been watching EA's Spore for a number of years before its release, and when I found out about DRM, what it could do, and that EA had been putting it into their games as a protection measure, I threw up my hands and never bought the game. To this day, I have always believed in the bell-curve: there will be people who will always steal games, and there will be people who never steal games; the only real protection measure that can be done is to make it difficult enough that average gamers won't just rip off the game. I'm hoping to get into game design, myself, and I know that thefts will aggravate me and upset me, but that's the cost of business. Even in stores, you will have thieves, and you can't catch all of them. It's expected loss, and it's up to the company and the employees to bring more customers in. If you have a good enough product, the bell curve will be broad enough, and the product will succeed.

To add to the possible links: <http://www.defectivebydesign.org/> seems like they have their stuff together. At least they're a group who's openly protesting the increasing number of companies using DRM to protect their software.



SenorKaffee

on **May 9, 2011 at 10:46 am** said:

Amazon Kindle Killswitch: <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/17/amazoncom-plays-big-brother-with-a-famous-e-book/>

Google Android Killswitch: <http://www.engadget.com/2008/10/16/google-implemented-an-android-kill-switch-those-rascals/>

Apple iPhone Killswitch: <http://www.engadget.com/2008/08/11/jobs-60-million-iphone-apps-downloaded-confirms-kill-switch/>

So far there is no sign of such a mechanism in Steam, Xbox Live or PSN. There is rumor about the Nintendo 3DS having a killswitch that can brick the device – but maybe that is just to scare off pirates.

Of course, just in theory, every remotely-triggered system that is capable of altering data could be abused in this way. Choose who you trust. A little paranoia is never wrong. :)



Anjin Anhut

on **May 8, 2011 at 9:38 pm** said:

Ha, kudos for the 1984 reference.

Damn, didn't know the killswitch thing, but it seems, like this is exactly the worrying me. Thanks for the links, worth a read.



SenorKaffee

on **May 8, 2011 at 9:25 pm** said:

There is already a killswitch mechanism in Android and iOS-Devices. Licensing problem with your apps or content? Oops, there goes your copy of “1984”. You get a refund, of course. No harm done, right?

There was a pretty lengthy discussion about digital distribution at Polyneux, I'm not sure if you read it. <http://www.polyneux.de/archiv/476-portal-2-steamworks.html> (german)

It lead me to some thinking about how an acceptable world of digital game distribution could look like.

http://www.kollisionsabfrage.net/blog/re_schoene_neue_download_welt (even more german)

Youth protection and other forms of “content filtering” (censoring) brings a whole new dimension to the discussion. I think we all agree that the german system is seriously broken. And there is just no right that can make those who control the content enable you to play online. Best thing consumer protection authorities can do is get you your money back. Which is not the point.

We loose control on every level and noone seems to care. We lost control about our multiplayer habits when LAN play went out of fashion. With open TPC/IP multiplayer there is always the option to cobble something together that works. With closed networks there isn't really. Of course this coin also has another side – in exchange for the control we got extra features like automatic matchmaking, cross-game audio chat and some degree of data and cheat protection.

Sometimes I get cocky and argue that the current breed of gamers is naive and lazy. But maybe it is just a generational thing and I am angry because I have trouble adjusting to this new world.