Team Canada

The Software Ethics of *Skates of Iron*

Upon first consideration, a project like *Skates of Iron* may seem to have few ethical considerations. However, there are many ethical issues relevant to all computer games, and to all software in general, which are relevant and which we considered in the design and implementation of our game.

Video games, as an entertainment medium, are part of an ongoing debate on the effects of media on children. The potential for inappropriate content to be targeted at children is great, particularly when violence is involved, which seems all too common considering the popular genres within gaming today. Among professional developers, these ethical considerations are generally resolved by the use of a ratings system, parental education regarding content in specific games, and stringent self-regulation policies preventing advertisements for inappropriate content from appearing where children are likely to be exposed to them. Hockey games, along with sports games in general, have not typically been central to the conflicts we’ve seen with *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty*, and indeed the tame content of our program is consistent with the relative lack of controversy surrounding similar games. Though we are not creating software particularly targeted at a youth audience, we do not see any issues arising from the content even if that was our goal.

Even without the violent content of an adult-targeted shooter game, we must consider that hockey has always been embroiled in a sometimes-fierce debate on violence in sports, more so than any other major professional sport. As a game with hard hits, physical play, a somewhat rough temperament, and specific (and relatively light) rules about “dropping the gloves” to have fistfights, some level of debate about violence is to be expected. To some degree, this is caused by outsiders unfamiliar with hockey culture and the context in which these issues arise; however, much of the concern is legitimate and has been addressed lately, particularly as new rules are introduced in the game to punish transgressions like hits to the head. As a
representation of hockey, these concerns are necessarily relevant to the creation of our game. In part because of the simplicity of our game, but also out of a desire to avoid negative, violent portrayals of the game, we have chosen not to include most of the content for which hockey is criticized. We have not included the ability to commit penalties such as high sticking or elbowing, and did not include a “fight mode.” The only ethical concerns relevant to the content of our game, then, revolve around our omission of these very real concerns. However, as our game is obviously meant as a simple abstraction, and not any sort of commentary on the state of violence in hockey, it is difficult to interpret these omissions as particularly misleading or harmful. Though software is protected speech under the First Amendment (see *IDSA v. St. Louis*) and we must always remain vigilant against overreaching censorship, we do not feel any important expression was repressed in our simple game.

Beyond this there exist concerns common to all software. It is of course important to be accurate in our descriptions of our program, and to strive not to falsely advertise what our project does or how it works; we are ready to revise our documentation should we find it necessary in light of the final content of our game. We must also remain aware of the potential negative effects of running any software; through well-written, well-styled code and adequate testing, we hope to minimize any risks of performance troubles and crashes on our or users’ computers. As an open source project, there is always the concern that our code might be reused for malicious purposes; however, the relatively narrow scope of possible uses for our code minimize this risk, and in any case these issues are outside of our control.

One issue slightly more unique to our project is that of intellectual property rights. Firstly, our game is modeled after and inspired by an NES game, *Blades of Steel*. Though the name is a pun on this old game’s title, and though we borrowed a small number of gameplay concepts (such as the shot arrow) from that game, our game is entirely original. All of the code and design, as well as assets such as graphics, were made solely by our team. Most of the rules and gameplay mechanics are not unique to the old game, but simply inherent to the game of hockey. As the rules of a game, these are ineligible for copyright or intellectual property
ownership. One other issue arises from the fact that NHL teams' names and logos are trademarked. We chose not to use the teams' names for that reason; we used fictional names for teams from the same cities, and loosely colored our jerseys after real ones, but did not include any graphics remotely identifiable enough to constitute infringement. Thus, we believe our game is sufficiently original to avoid any relevant copyright, intellectual property, or plagiarism issues.

Between these numerous considerations, we believe we have created ethically sound software. Our project does not give particularly special cause for concern with the issues of violence both in gaming and in hockey, nor to that of any message or statement. Our game is based on a public concept, and our content is entirely original and is careful to avoid any copyright or trademark grey areas.