



Ted Rogers
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Aphrodite Rising

Addressing Social Reality in Video Gaming

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Executive in Residence
Ted Rogers Leadership Centre

Ethical Leadership Case Study Collection
Case Number 016-003
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Introduction

Lukas Leiter, founder and president of Golden Bough Games (GBG), wants to bring his video-gaming company to the next level before he either goes public or accepts an offer from one of the bigger, more established companies in the industry. As he takes steps to establish GBG as a leading game developer by resolving the rift in the industry between traditional gamers who are in search of escapism and gamers who want the industry to be more socially-conscious, Lukas runs head on into the culture clashes and value differences that divide the industry. Faced with a complex and messy situation, he knows that the decisions he makes and implements now will foretell the success or failure of his quest to be a game-changer.

The Vision for Golden Bough Games

Lukas Leiter has reason to be proud of his achievements in the video gaming industry. As an undergraduate at Waterloo, Lucas had been active in the indie game-design scene and worked on a lot of open source projects, before starting GBG fifteen years ago. The firm's name has its roots in his love of Greek mythology, instilled in him as a boy by his grandfather who read to him from *The Golden Bough* every bedtime. GBG had immediate success with its first game, *The Golden Fleece*, a game in which multiple players earned experience points by overcoming obstacles and defeating mythical creatures on their way to retrieving the Golden Fleece, and earning the honour of being declared "God of the Universe." This was soon followed by other AAA-rated games like *The Battle for Athens*, *Zeus Thunder*, and other hits.

With the success of their first games, GBG's annual revenues quickly grew to \$30 million. At that point, growth stalled until the firm attracted the attention of Ryners, a global merchant bank focused on technology, media, and telecommunications. Ryners, impressed by GBG's consistent delivery of AAA-rated games over a 10-year period, received three places on

GBG's Advisory Board, in return for an infusion of working capital as well as savvy advice. Utilizing these assets, Lukas and his team were able to quickly build the firm to \$100 million in revenues. Today, GBG employs 200 people. If the media can be believed, it will not be long before GBG either goes public or is bought out by one of the big players in the industry, like Sony Computer Entertainment.

Lukas, never one to rest on his past achievements, knows that to maximize returns in the next phase for GBG, they have to do more. Like many game developers, he is concerned about the open warfare between those who want games to become vehicles for social/political/cultural commentary versus those in favour of the status quo which allows them to continue to enjoy the games that offer them the escapism they desire, free from criticism about their gender biases or stereotyping. The "Gamergate" controversy, which pitted progressives against adversaries accused of misogynistic harassment and libel, was characterized by vicious attacks on female bloggers and designers. It defined, in a very ugly and very public way, how the battle lines had been drawn. Lukas feels strongly that GBG should be at the forefront of change. In his vision, GBG games, should re-energize the dialogue among gamers, designers, and bloggers in a positive way, thereby bringing participants together again in their love for the game.

GBG's New Directions

To implement his vision for GBG, Lukas gathers together his team of designers, led by his long-time employee, Derek Judge, to review the GBG product line and brainstorm new ideas. GBG's games up to this point have been designed to provide the escapism and entertainment that traditional gamers crave. While GBG never crosses the line of social propriety as some games in the industry have done, such as *Grand Theft Auto V*, where the right to virtually rape female avatars could be won, a review of GBG's range of offerings certainly shows a tendency to reinforce gender and racial stereotypes. Lukas also remembers that they once had to delay the release of a game because it included

inappropriate religious symbols that would have been offensive to Muslim and Jewish players. And, that time, Lukas notes, they dodged a very messy situation only because they had just learned that a competitor's game incurred open protests because the designers had included a plaque praising Allah in a bathroom.

Despite the findings of the review, Lukas is frustrated by the team's lack of creativity for new ideas. He is particularly disappointed with the lack of enthusiasm shown by Derek, who, while a brilliant designer, tends to be more conservative in his views, liking the status quo. The best that Derek has come up with so far is a suggestion that all future characters could be animals or monsters of some sort, thereby eliminating the necessity to tag them with a gender, orientation or race.

Lukas realizes that he needs to bring in new blood to shake things up a bit at GBG. He has, at various gaming conventions, been impressed by a game designer named Sarah Sitwell. He is delighted that he is able to bring Sarah into the GBG family, making her director, new projects, reporting to Lukas directly. Derek remains as GBG's chief development officer, with primary responsibility for traditional GBG products, also reporting to Lukas. The team of designers will work for either Derek or Sarah on a project basis. As assignments and reporting structures have always been very informal and free-form at GBG, Lukas does not think hiring Sarah is a big issue.

Lukas soon finds that bringing Sarah on board is not going to be as easy a transition as he would like because some of the designers—almost all of whom are men—initially have problems working for a woman. Sarah admittedly is confrontational at times, as she does not hesitate to call designers out publicly if she feels it is merited. Some have already tagged her “Godzilla” behind her back. She and Derek are also rubbing each other the wrong way. Sarah, being ambitious, is making it clear that she hopes, at some point, that the two design portfolios will merge and she will be made the head of all design. In other words, she views herself locked in a competition with Derek. Lukas is not fully aware of Sarah's intentions.

Sarah Hits ‘Home Runs’

Despite her abrupt leadership style, Sarah develops two games in quick succession that appeal to those wanting social realism. This earns her respect from others at GBG, although, in some cases this respect is given begrudgingly.

Her first game, *Hit City*, engages players in the creation of livable cities, which feature the challenges common to today’s urban landscapes, such as crime, accommodating the homeless, eroding infrastructure, zoning laws, citizen activism and so on. Successful players are able to win new technologies and various kinds of landscape and buildings to expand and improve their new city. The second game focuses on developing a successful micro-finance operation in the Congo. These games quickly became AAA-rated, as, unlike other socially-oriented games, such as *Depression Quest* and *Gone Home*, they require real skill to play successfully.

Liking what Sarah has been able to do, Lukas, without thinking of how this may affect Derek, asks her to be present at the next brainstorming session with Derek’s design team, which continues to struggle with how to creatively address issues of sexism and racism in GBG’s traditional adventure games. At the meeting, Sarah proposes that, as players progress in skill and experience, they slowly morph into hermaphroditic or androgynous beings, thereby emphasizing that those who are the best players combine the best traits of both males and females, and different races. She points out that this progression to androgyny also fits well with the firm’s traditional use of themes from Greek mythology.

The team—or most of it, it seems—finds the idea inspired and aims to issue a redesigned version of *The Battle for Athens* in time for the next Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) in Boston. As part of the reissue of this popular game, GBG plans a thoughtfully designed presentation and media campaign so that gamers will be enticed to try the new game without prior judgment.

A Storm Unleashed

As the team at GBG is finalizing details for the relaunch of *The Battle for Athens*, details of the revisions to the game are leaked to the press. These leaks go out without the carefully written explanations and support that has been prepared for release at PAX. The reaction within the gaming community is immediate: many find the intervention by a female designer into a beloved game offensive, along with the notion of androgyny. Sarah receives escalating threats of bodily harm and even death on Twitter, some of them using the hashtag #BoomBoomSarahGBG. In a turn of events reminiscent of Gamergate, Sarah is doxed: her address is published online, and GBG is forced to move her out of her apartment, and to hire extra security.

About a week into the maelstrom, Sarah walks into Lukas' office and says, "I have a confession, Lukas. I was the one who leaked the redesign details. It was, in retrospect, a very stupid thing to do. I did it because I was concerned that Derek would take full credit for my idea at the PAX launch, and I wanted to be sure that the community knows it is my idea."

What should Lukas do now?

Questions

1. What are the ethical issues in the case?
2. As Lukas struggles to come to a decision, what facts, issues and concerns does he have to weigh in the balance? Who are the individuals or groups that have a stake in the outcome and will need to be considered in Lukas' deliberations and action plan?
3. What options and next steps are open to Lukas?
4. What is your evaluation of those options? Please outline your logic clearly, highlighting pros and cons, and your reasoning.
5. Considering all perspectives, which option is best? How would you implement this decision in chronological order?