Educational Game about Water Conservation

Wanrong Xu  
 School of Computing  
 University of Newcastle  
 Newcastle Upon Tyne  
 c1030208@newcastle.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Water is an indispensable resource for human survival. As the water crisis gets severe these years, water conservation becomes more and more important for humans. Meanwhile, education on water conservation has also become very important. The main aim of my project is to make an Educational Game about Water Conservation. This report presents the learning process and the progress of the project.

KEYWORDS

Water Conservation, Water Scarcity, Video Game, Serious Game, Educational Game, Game-based Learning, Game Engine, Unity 3D

1 Introduction

It is very important to make people aware of water conservation in order to keep the water scarcity from exacerbating. They should know what would happen if we face a water shortage.

This report discussed the importance of water, what water scarcity is, the effects of water scarcity, ways for water conservation, how to make a game and how educational game can help and impart knowledge to improve water scarcity.

1.1 Why is water important?

As we all know that water is important, not only for humans but also for all living beings. When it comes to the importance of water, we have to look at it from a biological perspective.

Martin F Chaplin has mentioned in his paper that the intramolecular motions within proteins necessary for biological activity are strongly dependent on the degree of plasticization, which is determined by the level of hydration [1]. Put simply, this can be understood as water is necessary for biological activity.

Water makes up about 70% of the human body, the brain contains more than 75% water. Related researches has confirmed that the human brain function is related to water intake, especially cognitive and emotional functions [2][3]. When our bodies are dehydrated, whether adults or children, concentration, memory, reaction speed, and positive emotions are worse than usual. Severe dehydration can even lead to death.

1.2 Water Scarcity

Water seems to be inexhaustible in most of our lives. With the development of the economy and the increase of the population, the demand for water resources continues to increase. Meanwhile, with the unreasonable exploitation and utilization of water resources, many countries and regions have experienced water shortage problems of varying degrees. This is what we called Water scarcity.

According to the official water scarcity report published by the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency on 16 June 2022 [4], the risk of water scarcity in some areas of Scotland has increased to Alert and in some areas has been raised to an Early Warning level.

Not only Scotland but there are also still many more countries and regions in the world facing the problem of water scarcity. According to the World Resources Institute [5], nearly a third of the world's population - 2.6 billion people - live in countries with "high water scarcity", with 1.7 billion people in 17 countries living in "extremely water-stressed" places.

All of the facts highlight the problem of water being a scarce resource. Therefore, protecting water resources become everyone’s duty.

1.3 Water Conservation

Water conservation is to effectively protect, control and manage water resources. There are a number of ways to achieve water conservation.

*1.3.1 Water conservation at home*.

Developing good water-saving habits can save a lot of water. Some simple things we can do at home to save water are listed below:

1. Turn off tap while brushing teeth
2. Take shorter baths
3. Turn off tap while applying soap
4. Turn off tap after each use
5. Wash fruits in a bowl of water instead of under running water

Besides, the use of water-saving appliances can also achieve the purpose of water conservation. A review of researches in the US, Australia and the UK concluded that retrofit programs to install water-saving equipment resulted in a 9% to 12% reduction in water consumption [6].

*1.3****.****2 Agricultural Water Saving Practices*.

Saving water is not just about home water-saving. The use of agricultural water-saving technology has become one of the important ways for many developed countries to alleviate the pressure of agricultural water use. In some regions, water-saving agriculture includes the following three practices [7]:

1. Water Saving Irrigation.
2. Limited irrigation.
3. Dryland cultivation.

Water saving irrigation is the center of water-saving agriculture and an important part of water conservancy modernization.

*1.3.3 Industrial Water Conservation*.

In the process of industrial production, it is almost impossible to live without water. A common use of industrial water is to use fresh or deionized water to remove contaminants from items and equipment.

For industrial water use, the use of water minimization technology can effectively reduce the demand for fresh water in the process of water use, thereby achieving the effect of water conservation [8].

We can also save industrial water by raising employee awareness, measuring water usage, optimizing water use, recycling waste, installing water-saving equipment and routinely inspecting plumbing.

2 Related Work

There are various methods that can be used to educate people about water conservation. One of these methods is to educate people with an educational video game. However, to make an educational game about water conservation, understanding water conservation is obviously not enough. In order to create a successful educational video game, it is important to understand the idea of an educational video game and how it differs from a normal video game.

2.1 Video Game

A video game is an electronic game that is interactable on electronic device platforms with the main purpose of entertainment. Video games can be divided into 4 categories according to different platforms: console games, arcade games, PC games, and mobile games.

All video games are defined by three basic design patterns in order to provide players with a virtual playground: Rules, Play, and Culture [9].

* Rules represents the ‘mechanics’ or operational constraints within the game construct, which governs the level of interactivity within the game.
* Play represents the experience the game provides through different tasks and challenges.
* Culture refers to the beliefs and norms that the game world represents.

*2.1.1 Benefits from Video games*.

In addition to entertainment value, properly designed video games are believed to provide benefits for different ages and understanding levels.

* Video games can encourage children to develop good habits.
* Video games can help the elderly to operate flexibly.
* Video games can help improve dynamic vision.
* Video games can help improve visual search.

*2.1.2* *Controversies of Video games*.

However, beyond beneficial uses, video games also have many controversies. There are many different aspects of video game controversies.

One of them is the addiction to video games, some parents believe that video games make children addicted to them and do not want to learn. Even because of the need to buy games to steal, robbery, and cause various social problems.

Another often controversial aspect is violence, a very controversial issue with video games is that some video games contain violence. This problem can actually be improved by rating the game depending on their level of violence.

Apart from these, since the tolerance of sexual themes in video games varies from country to country, sexual theme is also a very controversial topic about video games.

2.2 Serious Game

Serious game is originally defined as "games for application". It is a type of video game, but this type of video games are not just for entertainment but for application. The main purpose of serious games is to train or educate players on certain fields [10]. Since serious game birth in the 1980s, it have been widely used in military, medical, industrial, education, scientific research, training and many other fields.

There are several definitions of serious game. The first formal definition was introduced by Abt [11]. In his book, he uses games and simulations to improve education. After that, many teachers were influenced by him book. A few years later, the concept of "serious games" was redefined in a white paper by Sawyer. The updated definition is based on the idea of connecting serious purpose with knowledge and technology from the video game industry [12].

At the Serious Games Summit in 2004 and 2005, most people who attended the conference defined serious games as:

1. Interactive technology applications far beyond the traditional game market, including talent training, policy discussion, analysis, visualization, simulation, education, health care, etc.
2. Technology applications that can solve other problems, such as training soldiers to adapt to foreign cultures, getting people to work as a team, and teaching children to understand the principles of science.

*2.2.1 Different application fields*.

Under the constraints of the current technical conditions and market environment, the application fields of serious games are mainly in the following aspects:

*2.2.1.1 Education*

Video games that are used for game-based learning are often referred to as "educational games". It is a type of serious game, which is developed specifically for a specific educational purpose. Video games and educational video games have many common features, but they differ in purpose and content design. The main purpose of video games is entertainment, but the educational game is to impart knowledge while having fun. Computer experts use game-related technologies to develop educational software that educates people while they play. This type of game-based learning attracts learners to first learn about the game world and eventually learn about the subject embedded within the game through productive play.

In many countries, teaching in the form of interactive courseware has been used as early as a few years ago. Those multimedia courseware can actually be regarded as an early serious game. Although their interaction is too simple to be regarded as an actual game, this teaching concept is exactly the same as that of an educational game. With the development of internet technology and the spread of computer games, educational games are also developing very rapidly and this educational tool has gradually become a mainstream educational approach.

Understanding new concepts through play can bring a sense of personal reward, and well-designed educational games can motivate players and provide them with the ideal learning environment. This is why the design of educational games is important. Educational game design is a broad subject that encompasses very different approaches and methodologies. Prensky states that effective educational game design must strike a balance between fun and educational value [13]. It is very important to define the teaching requirements before starting the design.

When designing the game, the first thing should do is to choose the right genre for the game to develop. By doing so, a suitable language can be designed to describe the game and thus a suitable engine can be choose to support that language. The second thing is to add evaluation and adjustment to the design. Designers need to facilitate evaluation tools and support for adaptive learning scenarios without breaking game models. Then, the last step is to integrate games with a standards-compliant learning management system means packaging them as learning objects and including standard metadata to facilitate their discovery, integration, and deployment [14].

*2.2.1.2 Military serious game*

With the development of computer technology and artificial intelligence, the armies of various countries have started to use advanced technology to devise various training games that simulate real battles. Basically, military serious game provides experiences to players through simulations. While playing the games, they improve the command skills of officers and the ability of soldiers to deal with various battlefield situations.

Military serious games can be classified into three types: information provision/PR, awareness/behaviour transition and training [15]. Information provision/PR is aimed at public relations and military information delivery, an example of this is the game America’s Army. Awareness/behaviour transition can be regarded as the change of awareness of armed forces, promotion of recruitment, and simulation training participation. Training defines the type of game that developed for virtual military training such as military training, military health training, basic military medicine, communication education, weapons education, etc. It is widely used in the army, air force and navy. It consists of a simulation game representing actual training situations and a war game as a military simulation game.

There are a number of benefits to using military training simulators. To carry out an actual training in the armed force, it cost a lot of time, money and human resources to prepare all the equipment needed. A training simulator is a good solution to save these costs.

The representative example of military serious game is America’s Army, it is an FPS game developed by the US Department of Defense. This game was designed to inform, educate, and recruit prospective soldiers in America. According to game historian Carrie McLeroy, America's Army has "grown in ways its originators couldn't have imagined". There are a lot of training and simulation applications developed with America’s Army platform that have already been used to train and educate U.S. Army soldiers.

*2.2.1.3 Medical/Healthcare serious game*

Medical is another area of application covered by serious games. Medical serious games make up the second largest segment of serious games after educational games.

In 2020, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved a video game as a prescription drug for the treatment of ADHD in children. This incident broadened the idea of cross-border linkage between domestic and foreign game and medical industries. How games can be used in digital healthcare has also become an important issue for the industry.

In practical applications, the combination of functional games and digital medicine can provide solutions for improving patients' "clinical compliance", which means that if gamification is implemented in the medical field, patients will remain motivated for a longer period of time in the treatment process.

Not only for treatment use, but serious games can also use for medical training. Medical simulation plays a key role in training in all fields of medicine. Research has proven that video games can improve doctor performance, and they are a practical approach to healthcare simulation training. They also allow learners to make their own decisions and begin to understand what is happening at every point in the serious game progression. Compared to non-simulation training, a medical simulation training program can improve performance, reduce response times and reduce deviations from practice standards. It increases trainee confidence, competence and improves patient safety. Medical simulation training can also reduce cost and improve process efficiency [17].

Serious games enhance the benefits of medical simulation training by combining academic lessons with repetitive practice. Therefore, using serious games in medical training can help to generate learning outcomes that improve content retention and comprehension for long-term success in clinical settings. As the decision-making process is strengthened, learners are able to continue to be confident professionals and practitioners.

3 Project Approach

In order to achieve a better result, I chose to use a mature game engine to make the educational game about water conservation. I have researched different game engines and ended up choosing Unity 3D as the tool to create the game, since

3.1 Game Engine

Game engines are software development environment used originally to develop video games. They are used to improve the efficiency of game development.

A game engine is like an engine that controls the running of the game. A game work can be divided into two parts: game engine and game resources. The game engine calls the resources sequentially according to the requirements of the game design.

The main functions of a game engine usually include 2D or 3D graphics rendering, physics engine, animation, artificial intelligence, sound and streaming, etc. With game engines, developers can quickly create game programs without having to start from each function.

*3.1.1 Components of a Game Engine*

A complete game engine consists of many different components, each component has its own specific function. Game engines have 5 main components: Rendering engine, Artificial Intelligence, Physics engine, Sound engine and Networking.

Rendering is one of the most important functions of game engines. Once a 3D model has been created, the artist will give the model a material map in accordance with the different facets, which is equivalent to skinning the skeleton, and then the rendering engine will calculate all the effects of the model, animation, lighting and effects in real time and display them on the screen. Rendering engine is the most complex of all the engine components and its power directly determines the quality of the final output.

Artificial intelligence in video games is a unique sub-field, distinct from academic AI. It is used to improve the gamer experience, rather than machine learning or decision making [18].

Another important component of the game engine is the physics, which allows the movement of objects to follow a fixed pattern. For example, when a character jumps up, the gravity value built into the system will determine how high he can jump and how fast he can fall, and the trajectory of bullets and the way vehicles lurch are all determined by the physics system. The core part of the physics system is collision detection, which detects the physical edges of various objects in the game. This technology prevents two 3D objects from passing through each other when they collide, which ensures that when you hit a wall, you don't go through it or knock it over, as collision detection determines the position and the relationship between the two based on the properties between you and the wall.

A sound or audio engine controls the sound effects produced by in-game interactions. For example, the sound of opening and closing doors and the sound of running and jumping.

The network engine supports multiplayer or social gaming, allowing you to interact with other players.

*3.1.2 Mainstream Game Engines*

Which engine is better, is always a hot topic in the game development industry. There are two mainstream game engines: Unity 3D and Unreal Engine.

*3.1.2.1 Unity 3D*

Unity3D is a multi-platform comprehensive game development tool developed by Unity Technologies that allows user to create interactive 3D video games, it can also be used for architectural visualization, real-time 3D animation, etc.

As the world's leading platform for real-time interactive content creation, Unity has a massive user base. One of the reasons Unity has so many users and a large community of game development companies is that the language code is easy to learn and intuitive. It integrates the MonoDeveloper compiler platform and supports 3 scripting languages, C#, JavaScript, and Boo, with C# and JavaScript being the most common scripting languages used in game development.

There are many well-known companies in the game industry use Unity 3D as their game development tools, such as Activision, Blizzard, EA, Ubisoft, Tencent, and NetEase. Half of the games across all platforms are based on Unity, and 53% of the top 1000 games on the Apple App Store and Google Play were created with Unity. Furthermore, many famous games were created with Unity 3D, such as Cities: Skylines, Escape from Tarkov, Human: Fall Flat, Genshin Impact, Fall Guys, etc.

*3.1.2.2 Unreal Engine*

Unreal Engine is also a multi-platform game development tool, which developed by Epic Games. Compared to other engines, Unreal Engine is not only efficient and all-powerful, it also empowers developers with the ability to preview development results directly. It is well-known for its visual script development and realistic quality, which is why it is considered an AAA game engine.

Different from Unity, Unreal Engine is written in C++, which is a much harder language for beginners to master. However, one of the main advantages of Unreal is that it includes a visual programming system called blueprints, so game developers don't have to be experts at writing code. With blueprints, it is possible to quickly prototype and launch usable interactive content without even touching a single line of code. This greatly reduces the threshold for the use of game engines. People can create games even without any program experience, which makes Blueprint the main reason why this engine is a great tool for prototyping and iteration.

*3.1.2 Reasons to choose Unity 3D*

Unity 3D is easy to learn, step-by-step tutorial videos for beginners can be found on the official website. Furthermore, it has more tutorials on the internet than Unreal Engine, which makes it easier for me to find useful videos and start the project earlier.

3.2 Game Design

This is a preliminary game design and the following content may have been changed slightly during the continuous creation of this game.

*3.2.1 Overview of Concepts*

The purpose of this game is to create a serious game teaching children to clean and wash when required but not to use too much water each time. The game should be educational and teach children about water conservation.

To give players a more immersive feel, the game is designed as a single-player game from a first-person perspective.

*3.2.2 Players*

The target players of this game are children who may not yet be aware of water conservation. They can be students of a nursery, primary school, or even secondary school.

*3.2.3 Context Description*

The game can be run on a computer and ideally, it would also be available on a mobile device(mobile phone, iPad).

Player only need a few minutes of their spare time to play this game. For younger children who can not yet read, they might need an adult to tell them the instructions for the game.

*3.2.4 Instructional Objectives*

After playing this game, players should have a good awareness of water conservation. They should know that the storage of water resources is finite and not inexhaustible.

This game can be regarded as a survival game, the performance of players can be measured by the number of days they survive.

*3.2.5 Description of Game Environment*

The game takes place in the home of the character. There is a house with a bathroom, a bedroom, and a laundry. Each room has different appliances that can interact, such as bath tub, wash sink, washing machine, etc. Outside the house, there is a garden with some plants.

*3.2.5 Description of Gameplay*

The game starts in the morning. Each morning the player is given a certain amount of water and the player needs to complete the tasks for the day while keeping his hunger and thirst level greater than 0 in order to move on safely to the next day. There are a total of three days in the game, with each day having a little more tasks than the previous day. These tasks may be bathing, washing dishes, washing clothes, brushing teeth and washing face. When the player has safely passed the third day, which means that the player has not wasted any water, then the player is judged to have won. If the player does not make it through the third day, the game is lost.

In the main menu, there is an 'Instructions' button, click on it and game instructions will be displayed on the screen, which will help the player to get started.

*3.2.6 Look and Feel of Game*

In the game, the crosshair will become a cursor when it moves to an interactable object. The blue bar on the bottom shows the water left for the day (More UI will be added later).

A picture containing indoor

Description automatically generated

Figure 1: Show crosshair when objects cannot interact.

A picture containing indoor

Description automatically generated

Figure 2: Show cursor when objects can interact.

When the tap is on, the player will hear the water running sound, if the tap is on for too long, there will be a special warning sound to remind the player of water waste. Meanwhile, the player will also hear the character walking and jumping sounds, which make the game more realistic.

*3.2.7 Game controls*

* Control the player's view with the mouse.
* Walk with WASD.
* Jump with SPACE.
* Run with Shift.
* Click the left mouse button to interact with game objects.

4 Project Plan

In order to make the Educational Game for Water Conservation, there are a number of things that need to be done. In the current stage, some of them have already finished. However, there are still a lot more left. The **finished objectives** list contains all the things that I have finished, the **things to do** list contains the things in-progress and the things that clearly need to be done in the future. Throughout the lifetime of this project, more things might be added to **things to do** list.

4.1 Finished Objectives

* Research and learn about Water Conservation
* Research on Educational Games
* Learn Unity 3D
* Design the basic game flow
* Create the project in Unity 3D
* Create a general menu
* Create a FPS controller
* Find suitable Unity 3D assets
* Build the basic main scene
* Add necessary objects in the scene
* Create crosshair and cursor
* Replace the crosshair of interactable objects with the cursor
* Create dynamic water drops
* Start adding interaction with game objects
* Add light sources to lamps

4.2 Things to do

* Add the lighting effect of day and night
* Add open-door/close-door script and animation
* Complete the interactions with all the necessary game objects
* Add more detailed game logic(aim and win condition)
* Add audio(such as water stream sounds, open-door sound)
* Complete in-game UI
* Add win/lose conditions
* Add an introduction of game to guide the players
* Add more advanced game mechanics
* Finish an alpha build
* Play the game alpha build and polish it
* Make the game cross-platform if time allowed

5 Conclusion

It is clear that water is completely vital to everyone in this world. However, water scarcity has become a major issue. We should do everything we can to stop the water scarcity grow worse. Using an educational video game to provide a proper education can have an enormous impact on water conservation practices. However, this can only be achieved through a proper design of the educational game, which help with their positive learning benefits towards water conservation.

Overall I believe my project has gone well to a certain extent, though there still exist improvements which I will continue working on.

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