

Supporting Activism Through Games

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Introduction

There is a growing movement to use video games as forms of mediating political or social ideological activities; games as tools of persuasion and education (Gee, 2012). How these games are used by organizations to help achieve such goals or how effective they are as stand-alone or supporting tools is uncertain and will be the focus of this project.

This project explores the nature of digital technology, specifically video games, to mediate and support political or social causes. Within the context of games as cultural artifacts embedded within political spaces, we will be examining how participant communities or single users leverage video games to advance or support political or social goals, what ideological activities are supported by such interactive media, how effective interactive media is at supporting these goals, in what ways these media are ineffective, what other challenges existed when performing these activities, how current ideological practices can be modified or changed to meet goals, and design considerations for effective political and social mediation through video games. This project will be supporting future work for the design of video games and other forms of interactive digital media as cultural artifacts in support of human values and ethics. We examine how games interact directly with value-promoting systems.

This study is influenced, albeit very slightly, on prior work on uncovering the community activities around indie games. I now hope to explore the role some

communities or even individuals play or what activities they might engage in to address social issues or otherwise.

Methodology

To perform this research, we conducted two semi-structured interview studies with participants from political or social activist communities who use games and other forms of digital media to advance goals and ideology. Semi-structured interviews were selected because of their effectiveness for eliciting highly detailed data directly from engaging with study participants. Semi-structured interviews are also flexible, allowing for other requirements activities to take place should the opportunity arise such as task analysis and artifact collection. Considering the complex work of political and social activism as supported by digital, interactive media, interviews are a natural fit for exploring a relatively new field. An observation alone would not afford enough insight into understanding complex ideological activities performed by target communities.

Study questions were designed to be non-biased, favoring no particular ideology or cause. Questions were kept short, open, and concise to avoid double barreling and biasing. Loaded terminology was avoided as well to reduce potential for bias.

Additionally, the openness and generality of questions intend to minimize the chance for provoking sensitive emotions from participants and do no harm.

Questions and rationale:

- **What are the goals and values of [your] community?** This question aims to define the goals and values of the participants' community to eventually analyze the success of activist work supported by games.
- **Which interactive, virtual environment is used to achieve [your] community goals?** This question aims to define the game or interactive media used by the participants' community to support their goals and explores what role the environment plays in their activities.

- **How was the virtual environment effective for your goals?** This question examines how the participant perceives the virtual environment has affected or helped their community's activities. Perhaps a certain mechanic or designed media of the game as affected performance or a certain ideological practice aligns with the game itself.
- **Where do you think the virtual environment was less effective for your goals?** This question examines how the participant perceives the virtual environment to be ineffective at advancing their community's goals and why. Perhaps ideological practices of the community do not align with the game's design.
- **What other activities did the virtual environment support?** This question explores other potential activities that a virtual environment might support.
- **What were some challenges faced when performing this type of work?** This question further explores non-game challenges to the participants' activism work and activities.
- **What considerations should be made in the future for using virtual media to support [your] community goals?** This question intends to explore the potential for virtual environment forms such as games to better align with community practices.

Selection Criteria

Participants were selected based on their self-identification as political or social activists who engage in related ideological activity. These activities can range anywhere from simple advertising and “public awareness” to the mobilization of political action. Participants must also belong to an established or recognized organization such as a political party, game studio, special interest group, activist community, or campaign. Some participants selected may be considered experts in their domain because of their experience and background in professional political or social activism. Others may be domain experts in the design and implementation of games. Participants were not filtered and selected based on their ideology or beliefs to

eliminate potential for biased responses. Participants who are also academic domain experts on activism and media forms were also consulted for potential data.

Participants who simply play games or use games for non-ideological or non-activist purposes were excluded from the study and subsequently not selected. Data from apolitical participants would be useless to a study examining the role of leveraging interactive media to advance ideological goals or causes.

Recording Methods

Data was recorded using pen and paper and then transcribed onto digital format in a document. In some cases, interviews had to be performed from distributed locations. In these cases, interviews were facilitated via webcam and audio. Data was still recorded on pen and paper and study participants in both face-to-face and online interviews were informed of the data recording method (pen and paper) as well of the fact that their information was being recorded. The use of pen and paper data recording was chosen to reduce the amount of excise on the researcher when recording data. Recording audio and creating transcriptions take a lot of time and effort. Additionally, pen and paper is perceived as less intrusive into an interview conversation and allows both the interviewer and interviewee to focus primarily on the conversation at hand.

It is important to note that the notes recorded are not verbatim transcriptions of the interview sessions, but rather summarized points I wrote down. This was done to capture the main point of each conversation without putting further cognitive strain, though there is the risk of misinterpretation. I would confirm that the information I recorded was accurate with the participant from time to time.

Ethical Considerations

Because of the potentially sensitive nature of political views and beliefs, all interview data was anonymized to protect the identity and confidentiality of interview participants and their related communities. Social activism in games has been

scrutinized as of late, especially concerning those who use games to advance Feminism and Women's Rights causes. Threats of violence and harassment have become reoccurring incidents in the game development community (Wingfield, 2014). It would be prudent to safeguard the identity of participants who work in video game development within this community. Names of potential participant activist communities will also be withheld for the same reason.

Results

Two interview sessions were performed over the course of a two-week period, with a third session to be scheduled beyond the scope of this project. The first study session was conducted in-person with a university faculty member who was involved in an online community in the game *World of Warcraft*, a 3D multiplayer game involving millions of players all across the world (See Figure 1)(Kollar, 2014).



Figure 1. Screenshot, *World of Warcraft*

This participant, Participant 1, was involved in facilitating an online debate community that brought together a number of players who were interested in engaging in political debate and activism.

The second interview session was conducted over Skype with a representative, Participant 2, of an organization dedicated promoting the use of video games and interactive media to advance social causes. Participant 2's organization aims to support game developers that create games for serving humanitarian issues as well as give learning institutions access to educational games. Their group used a variety of games in support of a broad number of causes from basic education to race, gender, and even war.

	Virtual Environment	Goals/Values
Participant 1	World of Warcraft	Supporting valuable and constructive debate within the World of Warcraft community
Participant 2	Various (Darfur is Dying, Plague Inc. mentioned)	Advancing education, human rights, and other humanitarian causes through video games

Because so few participants were engaged in this study, qualitative coding was not performed over the data as in prior and current projects. Each participants' interview data was examined individually to identify unique insights and potential commonalities. Main points were summarized in a journal or in a footnote in MS Word related to the recoded data.

Goals of Organizations

The goals of the two organizations surveyed were different. The *World of Warcraft* community did not have an explicit or specific ideological goal. Participant 1's community worked to facilitate and promote the debate on behalf of players who engaged in ideological discussions. Participant 2's community had explicit ideological goals and values toward the promotion of education and human rights causes and supported game developers interested in using games to address these topics. Participant 2's community involved the use of games to bring awareness to war in Africa and even a game that models the spread of epidemics and diseases.

Broad Stakeholders

Participant 2 noted a broad community of stakeholders related to the development and usage of games to advance ideological causes. Government agencies, schools, humanitarian charities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were noted to major stakeholders and clients of Participant 2's community. These stakeholders work with developers and game designers to produce games that are client to their [the stakeholders] goals and values. Stakeholders are a major source of funding for many of these game developers.

Fluid Activity

Because both participants' organizations and communities had broad goals and values, political activity was highly dependent on who is working and engaging in the community. Activity is fluid. Participant 1's community in particular had no specific ideological or social goals other than to help facilitate debate on a virtual environment. The ideological activities related to that environment also depend on what players are occupying that space.

While Participant 2's community had specific goals of supporting humanitarian causes and education, the types of social and political interests that are served are dependent on what game developers are sponsored and co-developed. There were no

organizations with specific, idiosyncratic ideological goals that could be reached within the timeframe of this project.

Supported Activities

The games used by the two participant communities supported a number of activities beyond the scope of the game. While Participant 1 noted online protests and pride parades as occurring within the game, they stated, “what happens in-game usually stays in-game.” However, Participant 1 noted they hoped players would at least think more critically about certain issues, if not shift their opinions and ways of thinking entirely.

The various games around Participant 2 were developed to directly support humanitarian awareness campaigns and to promote engagement through eliciting financial donations or made appeals to prompt activism. What activities these games supported largely depended upon who developed the games and the games’ purpose. Participant 2 described games intended to teach players about diseases and epidemics and other games intended to bring awareness to genocide in foreign countries. Participant 2 described game mechanics of the latter as enabling players to support causes through donations.

Primary schools and various organizations are clients of Participant 2 who work with their organization to create and sponsor games intended for school-age children or other individuals with internet access.

Participant 2 also described activities such as game conventions that provide a showcase and a public outlet for many of these games that in turn promote and further the interests of convention organizers.

Repurposed Game Spaces

Participant 1 described the *World of Warcraft* environment as not designed or necessarily conducive to debate and political activity. However, players expressed a

desire to engage and connect with one another through political debate regardless of whether or not the game was designed for such an activity. Thus, game spaces can be repurposed or envisioned by players for non-game purposes.

Participant 1 described players as organizing into groups based on similar views in the form of in-world groups known as guilds. Participant 1 described guilds as potentially engaging in political activity both within and outside the game space. Online protests by players in China as well as LGBTQ pride events held by entire server populations within the game environment were mentioned. Thus, game spaces were repurposed outside of their entertainment context.

Limitations of Games

Repurposed spaces like *World of Warcraft* however present structural problems when it comes to supporting activist or political activities. Game administrators and algorithms for moderating in-game communication may disrupt ongoing debates and activities. The open nature of games like *World of Warcraft* also means trolls and uncordial players are capable disrupting debate activities. Even the game itself is not designed to effectively facilitate extensive debate activities. These are all barriers to Participant 1's community activities.

While games present an innovative and novel approach to communicating political ideals, Participant 2 mentioned games meant to educate, spread awareness, or promote activism could be limited by poor design and implementation. Participant 2 described a difference between incorporating social issues or topics as playable elements and simply presenting that information in a way that is disjointed from gameplay. Many games that Participant 2's community support suffers from some issues of disjointed mechanics.

Measuring Impact

Participant 1 did not know of changes or activities occurring offline that were influenced by their debate community activities. It is also difficult to determine if other

players will find a game fun or engaging. This problem was noted by Participant 2 for a number of games that had little to no audience. Even with games that reach large audiences, Participant 2 had no way to measure the impact of playing a game on the broad picture of the political and social landscape. Thus, the impact of these games is hard to measure.

Like any form of media, individuals can choose to consume or not consume the content presented. People can select themselves out of playing a game much in the same way they can pass over a request for donations or a documentary about violence and war. The same effects are reproduced with video games, especially these that reach such a limited audience. These present a barrier to getting ideological messages across.

Discussion and Reflection

When it comes to discussing topics related to political activism and movements, I am particularly wary of subjects who "present a particular picture," that being an idealized view or overstatement of the impact of their work. I especially want to avoid or at least create an environment where painting an idealized portrait of one's activist work could occur. There is the risk that "overstatement" may have occurred. During the course of the interview sessions, participants remained fairly objective and did not seem to overstate their activities.

A major problem of this study was the difficulty of obtaining participants. Only two interview sessions were conducted over the course of three weeks. Finding willing participants in a timely manner was a huge obstacle. Many potential participants either changed their minds and declined to participate or could not find suitable times before the project deadline. Future studies will require more time allotted for seeking participants from a broader range of communities. Future studies should also reevaluate the ideal participant type as to allow for the best range of participants possible, maximizing the chances of finding willing participants.

However, this study explores a fairly new, distinct, and exciting field in digital media and social activism practices. Using an interview protocol with succinct and specific questions, I was able to expose some detailed, albeit still limited, insights directly from subject communities about the practices around using digital media and video games in support of ideological causes.

It would be great to explore future developments in the field of games used for social and political causes. The field, however, is still emerging and will take time to mature. There are also so many more game developers and designers out there who do this type of work that I was unable to make contact with.

Implications for Design

Observing emerging game design trends

Because this is an emerging genre or field of video game and activist work, observing trends to see what game elements work with what activist practices will be an important step. The fluidity and experimentation in the game development industry means that trends could reveal new or effective means of supporting activism through using digital media such as games. Participant 2 noted that the various games they work with are more akin to a trial and error patchwork of excellent to less effective games. As mentioned by Participant 2, there are few conventions or established principles for designing games to serve social or political causes. How this field matures is entirely dependent on the game development and activist community.

Ensure games' messages are integrated with mechanics and gameplay elements.

Poor game design and integration of message with game elements was a major issue discussed by Participant 2. Many games were noted to have made the mistake of presenting information relevant to increasing awareness about certain issues in ways that were not embedded in interactive gameplay. Games that reached small audiences often were not well designed, squandering the intended message of the game.

Designing games to facilitate group learning

Participant 1 described *World of Warcraft*, a massive multiplayer online game, as useful for group interaction and learning. If one were to imagine a game designed to support actual political or social engagement on a multiplayer-scale, there is great potential for multiplayer games as points of group learning about common issues. The community of Participant 1 was very fluid and dynamic, allowing for a range of discussion and topics. Affording fluidity in game spaces may be a potentially useful design element to assist in mass engagement and learning.

Designing criteria for measuring effectiveness of games

Both participants noted uncertainty as to whether or not their work was impactful. They could not perceive of any immediate changes effected by their use of video games for social goals. By the nature of online, distributed games, they cannot see or meet with their audience directly. Participant 1 did not know if facilitating debates in *World of Warcraft* led to any offline activism or if people were actually “thinking harder” about issues. Participant 2 was similarly concerned about the impact of their work.

Future work should involve designed criteria for evaluating the impact of social causes supported by video games. These criteria are possibly best implemented for games intended for use in school curriculum. Educational games can be overseen and monitored by teachers who can engage with young students who play these games. Perhaps games can have conclusions designed to require players to make plot-deciding choices that test players on how much they have learned and apply their knowledge as part of the final test. Such a test should also have a visible impact on a game’s conclusion.

Also, Participant 2 noted they use the game *Darfur is Dying*, which I have studied before (See Figure 2).



Figure 2. Screenshot, *Darfur is Dying*

Darfur is Dying, developed to bring awareness to the Sudanese Civil War, was praised for reaching a wide audience and helping to raise awareness of the ongoing conflict—it was touted as a success. However, the game was criticized in the broader context of global humanitarianism. While the game did reach a wide audience, the impact of donations and awareness on the ongoing structural and social problems in Sudan (now split between South and North Sudan) is ambiguous. Many political commentators still identify the same, persisting problems occurring since *Darfur is Dying* was released at the height of the Save Darfur Campaign in 2008 (Dahya, 2009; Kapoor, 2013).

Realizing this, the definition of “success” should also be evaluated and carefully planned to ensure game intends to serve its touted social goals. Success should not be measured on how wide an audience a game reaches or how many dollars are donated after playing a game such as *Darfur is Dying*, but rather on if the structural and

social problems that lead to humanitarian crisis are addressed. In turn, activist and humanitarian organizations that seek to use games to effect social or political change should also evaluate their goals and activities on the basis of whether or not they will address ongoing issues.

Conclusion

The project encountered enormous limitations in terms of scope and participation. However, it was able to elicit some key insights into how video games and other interactive digital media are leveraged to support ideological goals on behalf of social activist or political organizations. Future work must seek out participants from a broader community of activists and game designers to form a more comprehensive and mature picture of activities in this space.

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Appendix 1. Protocol

- **What are the goals and values of [your] community?** This question aims to define the goals and values of the participants' community to eventually analyze the success of activist work supported by games.
- **Which interactive, virtual environment is used to achieve [your] community goals?** This question aims to define the game or interactive media used by the participants' community to support their goals and explores what role the environment plays in their activities.
- **How was the virtual environment effective for your goals?** This question examines how the participant perceives the virtual environment has affected or helped their community's activities. Perhaps a certain mechanic or designed media of the game as affected performance or a certain ideological practice aligns with the game itself.
- **Where do you think the virtual environment was less effective for your goals?** This question examines how the participant perceives the virtual

environment to be ineffective at advancing their community's goals and why. Perhaps ideological practices of the community do not align with the game's design.

- **What other activities did the virtual environment support?** This question explores other potential activities that a virtual environment might support.
- **What were some challenges faced when performing this type of work?** This question further explores non-game challenges to the participants' activism work and activities.
- **What considerations should be made in the future for using virtual media to support [your] community goals?** This question intends to explore the potential for virtual environment forms such as games to better align with community practices.

Appendix 2. Data

HCDE 313 — Interview Session 1

Q1: What are the goals and values of [your] community?

Rationale: Identify the goals of the target community.

On World of Warcraft, we help facilitate debates on our server over the general chat system. We think debate is a good way to meet and engage with other people. People who join our discussions talk about anything in the range of politics and recent events. We try and keep things organized and polite, and things usually run smoothly, surprisingly.

~~**Q2: Which interactive, virtual environment is used to achieve [your] community goals?**~~

~~Rationale: Identify any potential useful games leveraged by the participant and their community.~~

Q3: How was the virtual environment effective for your goals?

Rationale: Identify how games and personal feelings intersect.

World of Warcraft wasn't made to be a game to facilitate debate. We're just on there using the game's system as a place for us to have debates and open discussions. But, it brings together a lot of people who share the same interest in talking and debating. People get together. They organize and have meaningful discussions. WoW also allows

people to form different chat groups to keep things from spilling over and getting chaotic. We think that our activity makes for interesting group discussion and learning.

Q4: Where do you think the virtual environment was less effective for your goals?

Rationale: Identify how games and community feelings intersect.

WoW, again, isn't made for debating. Chats occur in the small chatbox and conversations can get lost easily. Moderators sometimes get in the way of debates. There are a lot of rules in the game on player conduct. We're also really vulnerable to trolls or people who want to pick fights. They can come in at any time and we have to be ready for them or else they'll derail the conversations.

Q5: What other activities did the virtual environment support?

Rationale: Identify non-game activities of the participant.

We don't really do anything ourselves. It depends on what people in the community do. I know that some people organize outside of WoW on forums. Whether or not they actually do things is something that depends.

It depends on who is talking at the time and who's debating. The community is really fluid. I know that there are some groups who are part of political guilds or parties who debate as a team. Maybe some activists are in there too. I can imagine them using WoW to organize.

There are some servers that host (LGBTBQ) pride parades in the game. Proudmore server. Some guilds I know are definitely political. Some players in China also staged and in-game protest about censorship. But what happens in-game usually stays in game. We're not out to change minds, just to get people to think harder about things.

Q6: What were some challenges faced when performing this type of work?

Rationale: Identify where participant feels their work has had less of an impact.

We try hard to keep things pleasant. It helps that WoW has a language filter. But, sometimes, things can get heated and someone has to step in before arguments explode. We want people to have good debates and share or shape their own views, not to get into useless fights. Sometimes players try to take it out on each other and they end up fighting in-game.

Q7: What considerations should be made in the future for using virtual media to support [your] community goals? Rationale: Identify ways participant thinks their work can be improved.

I don't really know. WoW wasn't made for debating. It's a video game, not a forum. Everything happens on one little chatbox and in a game like WoW, there are usually hundreds of players all around at once, though only a small fraction of them actually

participate in debates. It gets hectic. Even if we try our best to keep things civil, someone ends up being a real jerk or a troll and we can't control that. Also, game moderators can sometimes get in the way of debates, even if they aren't impolite. The automatic language filter can sometimes get in the way.

HCDE 313 – Interview 2

- **What are the goals and values of [your] community?** This question aims to define the goals and values of the participants' community to eventually analyze the success of activist work supported by games.

We use video games as educational tools to entertain and promote social good. Our games are used to serve critical humanitarian goals and educate people about related issues. We see games as a future way to engage with people and broaden the impact of humanitarian efforts. We also support game developers who are interested in creating games for similar purposes. Human rights are our biggest concern.

- **Which interactive, virtual environment is used to achieve [your] community goals?** This question aims to define the game or interactive media used by the participants' community to support their goals and explores what role the environment plays in their activities.

We have a variety of games that we develop and publish ourselves as well as other games developer by other parties that we host and support. For example: Plague Inc. is an independently developed game that is about how pandemics can spread. We have games about neocolonialism and women's rights. It's a big tent of games for activism. What games are made and what interests are served also depend on the interests of the developers and stakeholders.

- **How was the virtual environment effective for your goals?** This question examines how the participant perceives the virtual environment has affected or helped their community's activities. Perhaps a certain mechanic or designed

media of the game as affected performance or a certain ideological practice aligns with the game itself.

These games tackle the real issues directly and try to offer players ways to explore and learn about these problems. Because they're online, anyone can share and access them. Some of these games reach millions of people and some are used in classrooms around the country to teach young students about certain issues. Games like Darfur is Dying allowed people to learn extra information about the Darfur Genocide and gave them the chance to donate to humanitarian causes. That game was played by over a million people.

Games are effective cause they're interactive. They allow people to learn by doing without having to experience the real traumas or experiences others face every day. It's a way of teaching.

- **Where do you think the virtual environment was less effective for your goals?** This question examines how the participant perceives the virtual environment to be ineffective at advancing their community's goals and why. Perhaps ideological practices of the community do not align with the game's design.

Other games that don't receive publicity; We can't really measure their impact. Some games get really low traffic. Not everyone is interested in these kinds of game. While we try to support all these games, some of them aren't the best designed or produced. Some have flaws or are buggy. For example, certain games aren't that intuitive or fun because they throw a bunch of information out at people without really making it into a game. Games are best at teaching when they involve action, not just reading information on a screen. That's what news media is for. And if a game is unplayable because it's poorly designed, chances are you are going to lose your audience.

- **What other activities did the virtual environment support?** This question explores other potential activities that a virtual environment might support.

Again, a lot of these games try to support humanitarian or social issues like genocide, racism, and sexism. It depends on the organization the games are made for or the developers; what they are interested in and what activities they engage in. We present a lot of these games at the Games for Change Festival and other gaming conventions around the world. These events are used to promote awareness of issues as well as help developers and interest groups to network to develop future games that tackle other issues.

- **What were some challenges faced when performing this type of work?** This question further explores non-game challenges to the participants' activism work and activities.

With the majority of gamers interested in playing mainstream games, it can be hard to get some of these games and issues exposed to the public. It's unfortunate that many people are apathetic or don't care to understand major world issues. Without a major public campaign, we'd have a hard time spreading awareness. Without support, we couldn't be doing the work we want to be doing. Donors and funding are huge. Developers would have a hard time making money for their work if it weren't for sponsorships from government agencies or NGOs. However, this is a young and growing movement with a lot of great potential. It's going to take a while, but we are optimistic.

- **What considerations should be made in the future for using virtual media to support [your] community goals?** This question intends to explore the potential for virtual environment forms such as games to better align with community practices.

There are a lot of emerging trends in game design that developers should look into when making games for social change. They should pay attention to those trends to maximize their potential for spreading awareness about issues. These games should be engaging and immersive and not like lectures. Fun and entertainment should be a huge factor. If your game is broken and hard to play, it's not going to be very successful. A lot of the less successful games aren't as fun to play and people can lose interest from these really subtle things. Better, good games make all the difference. It's important to attract and keep players' and donors' attention.