

Designing Games for Social Progress

Meas, Perry

HCDE 313

J. Turns

March 12, 2015

Introduction

This report will be prepared as a game pitch for a potential video game to be developed by this emerging community of game designers and developers for social change. The report will provide for a series of design considerations and recommendations for the development of future games intended to be leveraged as artifacts for advancing social and political goals. Stakeholders can use these design considerations to develop a new game or redesign and existing game to better fit a social or political space. This report builds upon previous explorations of games in support of social and political causes. The background research conducted for this project will be presented as findings to be leveraged in support of my proposed game design considerations. Ideally, game designers and political activists can better align their processes and workflows through the development of tailor-made digital mediums and political/social activities. As a future game designer with a focus on political and social activism myself, I am in more direct communication with my stakeholders. Interview and observational studies were effective for gathering detailed data from users and stakeholders within this space. However, with my relative inexperience, my recommendations and analysis are still, to a degree, speculation.

Findings

There is a great diversity of social and political issues or topics that game designers for social activism seek to address. These range of income inequality to LGBTQ identity and rights, and civil war and genocide, among many others. The game *Papers Please* was observed to explore the notion of a dystopian society, while games such as *Darfur is Dying* (See Figure 1) explores refugee experiences during the Sudanese Civil War (Meas, 2015).

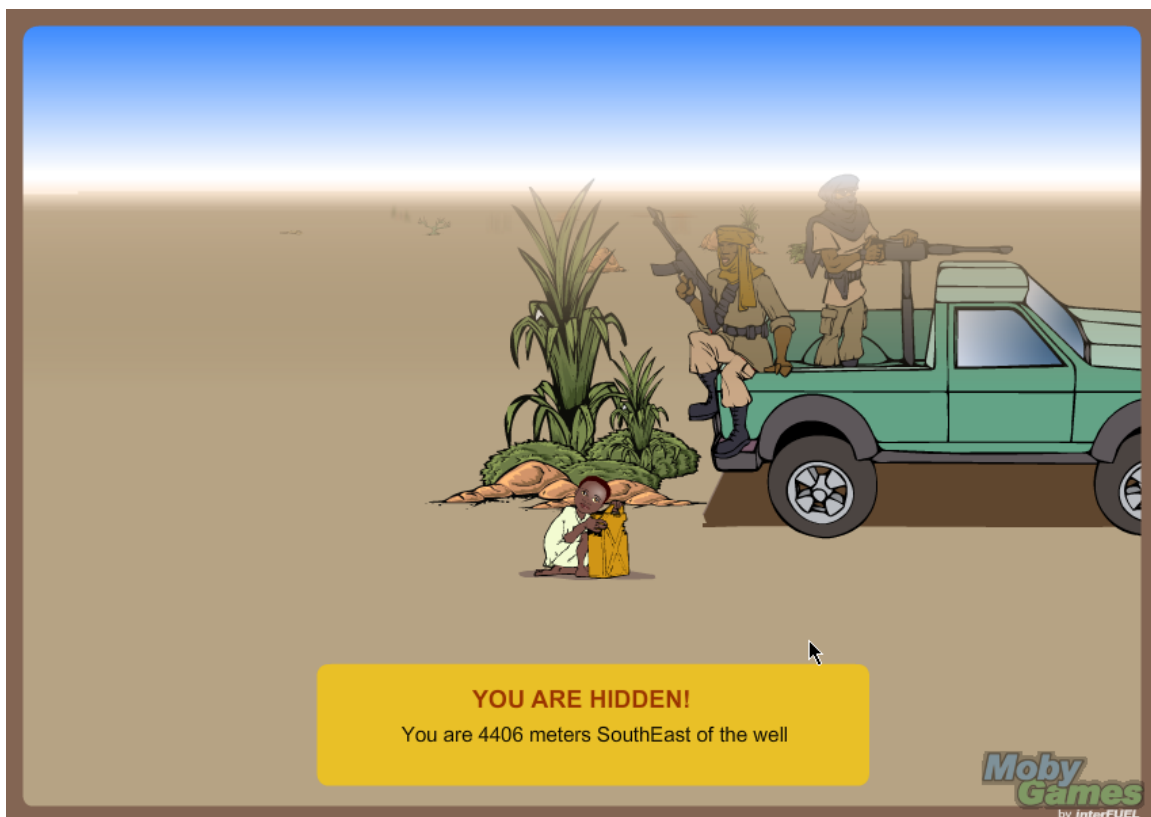


Figure 1. Screenshot of *Darfur is Dying*.

Stakeholder Diversity

There are a number of high-profile stakeholders involved with using games to advance social and political causes. These stakeholders may constitute government agencies, charity organizations, non-profits, and other types of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These stakeholders provide major

incentives for game developers to create games for social causes through the use of ideological influence and financial support (Meas, 2015).

Repurposing of Game Spaces

Gamers repurpose spaces for their social or political activities, even if that game was not designed to facilitate such player-to-player interactions. How effective that space is a function of how regulated that multiplayer space is. In my research, I discovered that people use the game *World of Warcraft* to facilitate political debate as well as host several social activist-type events such as a LGBTQ pride parade as well as online protests against government censorship (See Figure 2).



Figure 2. Screenshot from *World of Warcraft*

However, these activities did not translate into offline action and remained only on the online space. Game moderators and non-cooperative players also served to disrupt many of these community-building activities (Meas, 2015). Therefore, if a future multiplayer game in support of these social and political activities

were to be developed, they should afford a fluidity and openness in interaction, allowing players to direct conversations and activities. The reduction in moderation and control will also help ensure the community remains intact.

Lack of Integration of Game Mechanics with Game Themes

Games that attempt to introduce moral or social themes may be limited by poorly designed mechanics. Players may not perceive or endure an intended emotional impact from a game element if it has no visible impact on gameplay. This was observed in the case of the game *Papers Please* (See Figure 3), where a study participant felt the emotional potential of the story was squandered by the lack of playability with respect to the game's intended moral themes (Meas, 2015).

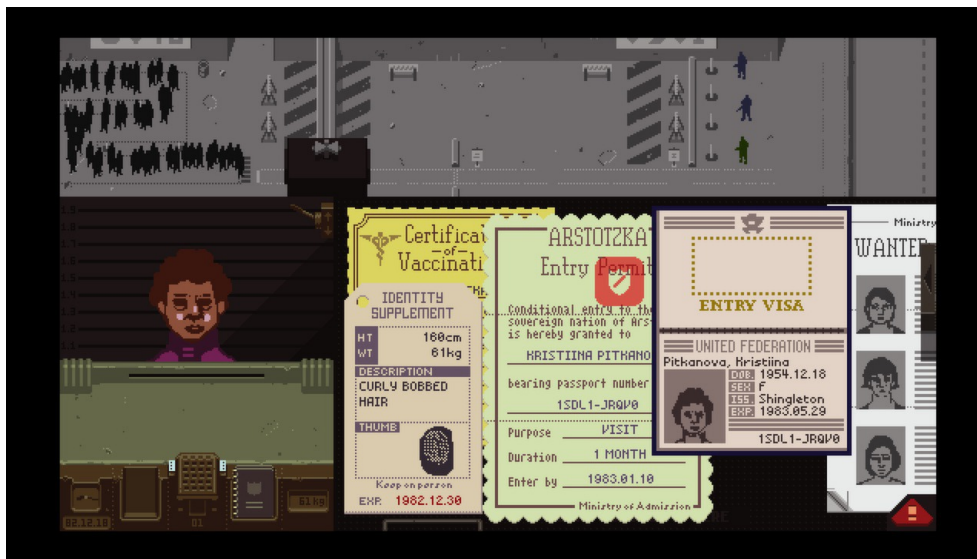


Figure 3. Screenshot of *Papers Please*

The following is an excerpt from a prior study I conducted:

As with Papers Please, the intended emotional effect of having to earn a wage to care for the main character's family was lost because the player's in-game choices did not have a visible impact on gameplay. The study subject stated that

he did not meet or see the family in-game and their potential deaths did not affect gameplay or the main character in any way. [The] subject described the plot devices as being ineffective precisely because the game's various conclusions did not feel substantially different from one another. If there is no perceived impact or developed sense of urgency from the player's decisions in the game, the emotional effect or incentive becomes squandered or non-existent.

This was also a recurring problem with a social activist organization interested in using games as tools to advance social and political causes. Games used by the participant organization intended to educate players on current social issues were described as falling short on their goals due to disjointed game mechanics and learning goals. These games in turn had low player traffic and were not very notable, weakening their intended message (Meas, 2015).

Lack of Effective Criteria for Evaluating Game Impact

There are no coherent or standardized ways to measure the impact of games intended to educate players on social issues. Social activists who use games are uncertain of the impact their medium has on existing political and social structures or spaces. Many games intended to address social and political topics were noted to have reached a minimal audience. Subjects of prior studies noted that it was difficult to even determine the impact of games with large player traffic. Measuring a game's impact on ongoing issues by means of views, shares, or campaign donations are also problematic considering such measures do not correlate with successful addressing of a game's target issue or topic (Meas, 2015).

Game Design Opportunity

Recognizing the findings of this project, I present an idea for a potential game. This game is a multiplayer online game intended to facilitate group learning and

engagement around a specific social and political topic. The topic I suggest for this game could revolve around the construction of gender, ethnic, and cultural self-identity. This is a topic I have seldom seen seriously explored in video games. Representation of diverse ethnic and cultural groups is also very lacking and a current issue within the gaming industry (Gittleson, 2014; Wingfield, 2014). The creation of such a game would appeal to the growing market of socially aware gamers who are interested in diverse representation in gaming and would fall within the goals of the game development studio interested in using games to advance important human values such as inclusion and equal representation. A game would be an effective medium for communicating these values and tackling these issues because of its affordances for interactivity and learning through play. Games are effective as learning tools because they enable players to interact with visual and perceptual simulations of events that lead to specific outcomes that would otherwise be difficult to understand (Gee, 2012).

Mechanics

The primary mechanic of this game is to prompt players to make a series of exploratory moral, social, ethical, and personal choices that will affect the outcome of the game and encourage players to reflect on these choices. This potential game can be 2-dimensional multiplayer role-playing, point-and-click adventure game, where players control characters and navigate the game environment and interact with other players they encounter to complete game objectives. The game can be styled in the form of a textual, visual, and audio visual novel (See Figure 4).



Figure 4. Example of visual novel game format

Players' main interactions will involve exploring the game environment as well as making conversational decisions with the game's non-player characters.

Players' decisions will bring about different scenarios and challenges that they will experience as a group. Players navigate and complete challenges by means of collaborative thinking and decision-making.

Multiple players control a series of different characters, each with a unique identity and attributes that can be shaped throughout the plot of the game. Players interact with in-game characters to unlock new story elements. Players can meet and befriend these in-game characters and experience in-game events with them as they would in real life to shape the identities of their player-controlled characters. Story elements for each player character can be procedurally generated to reduce similarities between player experiences and keep the game experience fresh, unpredictable, and engaging.

Decisions players make throughout the game affect different outcomes to the very end of the game's plot. Players may encounter simple point-and-click decision making scenarios as well as contextualized puzzles meant to call to complex moral and social themes the game intends to represent. What these puzzles are is uncertain at this time as these mechanics will be designed and developed by the lead design team.

Plot

The game's plot centers around exploring the experiences of ethnic minorities and women in the United States and how these experiences construct identities of people living in this current age. The game can explore historical legacies of sexism and racism in ways few games have done, but with a historical context beginning in the late 1990s. This time setting has the potential to explore the numerous historical occurrences since that decade as well as appeal to the nostalgia of current millennial generation of American gamers whose average age ranges from mid twenties to early thirties and comprise the majority of the video game market (ESA, 2014).

The potential game's plot revolves around youths of color who grow up during this time period to about present day. The game's characters, which are controlled by the players, must navigate experiences unique to minority and historically disadvantaged groups and make decisions around these experiences. Players will face challenges to their character's identities and the choices they make will affect the life experiences of the characters they control. Characters' stories will be developed to be as realistic as possible to enable players to make real world parallels. Historical events that occurred in the 1990s and during the rest of American history will come into play and context. This

should be intended to force players to reflect upon past events in order to advance in the game as well.

Players can choose a different set of non-normative characters of various gender, ethnicity, or cultural identity. Again, these characters come from diverse minority or cultural backgrounds that are historically disadvantaged through past discrimination. Players can also choose to create their own characters with unique identities and variable attributes. Different character attributes chosen by players, such as gender, race, and sexual orientation, account for different in-game experiences.

The game's plot may advance in an episodic format beginning with the players' characters' childhoods and ending by their adulthood, with different plot outcomes afforded by different aggregate game decisions affected by each individual player. At the end of each episode or vignette, the players' characters maintain a diary or log in which to allow player to review and recap game events as well as provide players further immersion into the thoughts, feelings, and personas of their characters.

The standard or common plot outline begins each player character in early childhood. Players navigate relationships with their virtual parents and make decisions on what views to adopt and experiences to engage in. These early game decisions will have future impacts of the games storyline. As a multiplayer game, player characters can interact with each other, as would young friends growing up as children in the United States.

The following outlines an example plotline narrative that a player would experience:

All her life, Audrey Yuan (A female Asian American character) has lived under the idea of the American dream, an idea instilled by her parents who immigrated in 1982 with dreams of a new life. We begin the story during Audrey's childhood in the early 90s. As fairly new immigrants, her family has very few means. They live in a small working-class Chinese American community in a major west coast city. Unfortunately, there are no children her age, only 3rd or 4rd generation Chinese Americans.

On TV, Audrey sees few positive representations of Asian Americans or other people of color. On a rare occasion, she will encounter tokenized Asian Americans. In films, she sees stereotyped images of Asian men and women. After watching American news programs following the 1992 Rodney King Riots, her parents make comments disparaging African Americans and Latinos. Audrey can question her parents on their views, agree with them, or she can ignore them. Questioning, agreeing, or ignoring her parents will have consequences further in Audrey's story.

In this part of the story, Audrey has the option of speaking Chinese or English with her parents, affecting her identity in a later chapter. She also has the choice of watching English or Chinese TV programs, further affecting a future plot outcome. In one scenario element in the game, Audrey can arrange her TV watching schedule, watching a total of five TV programs with a varying mix of English and Chinese programs. She can also change the immediate channel on TV for the same effect given that a certain scene in the game has a TV for Audrey to engage with.

In elementary school, Audrey has to make friends and meet new people. Her goal is to make as many friends as possible. Who she becomes friends with and how many friends she has will affect a future outcome in the game. She can also choose to self identify as her English name or her Chinese name, Sijia to affect different story outcomes.

Audrey encounters micro-aggressions from classmates who have never seen Asians before. Audrey has to make some choices about how to respond to the micro-aggressions. She can fight back and risk getting bullied and lose social capital, laugh along with the students and increase her social capital, or ignore them and risk internalizing the micro-aggressions. Her choice will again affect some future plot outcome.

At this point in the story, Audrey only encounters White, Black, or Latino students. Depending on her actions in the past with her parents, she will have different conversational options for the different students.

Design Implementations

Contextualized Learning

Contextualizing game decisions with the experiences of people living in the United States will allow for enhanced learning and comprehension of the experiences real people have faced in America ranging from sexism to racism and more. Plot elements in the game would be designed to have visible effects on the players' characters, raising the stakes and encouraging players' to emotionally invest themselves in the game. Players' decisions at each critical story element will have visible impacts on the remainder of the game's storyline. By ensuring game mechanics are directly tied to the game's story and social or moral themes, the risk of communication failure by bad game design is averted.

Each game challenge or puzzle scenario would also be designed to test players' knowledge of historical occurrences or current issues in order to complete or surpass each obstacle.

Affordances for Group Learning and Contextualized Game Spaces

The development of a game designed for group learning and interaction as well as a game designed to explicitly tackle serious social and political issues would resolve issues associated with the repurposing of game spaces in games not intended to advance or serve social and political causes. The game's design and game moderators will not be obstacles to social and political activity within the game context.

Player-to-player interactions will also be limited to pre-determined conversations to prevent the potential for abuse that may occur using a chat system. Players would interact with each other with pre-determined but specially designed conversational options that are intended to advance the plot of the game. The development of a tailor-made game space for social and political engagement also ensures that game mechanics are better integrated with learning activities.

Players would also be forced to work together to solve puzzles or challenges that are contextualized into real social and political issue spaces. By working together, players can share and build upon their knowledge of these spaces such as race, gender, culture, and identity to affect group learning and understanding of these spaces.

Metadata Design for Evaluating Learning

Establishing metadata design for player decisions would enable developers to analyze the behavior of players and decision patterns made throughout the game. Player metadata would be effective for evaluating the learning process of the game and evaluating the game's learning outcomes and impact based on tracked statistics of what decisions a community of players has made over time. Impact evaluation would also occur using the game's conclusion chapters.

Positive or negative outcomes for the players' characters will signal poor learning of the games themes and perhaps even prompt players to retry again.

Encouragement of Offline and External Agency

The game would also encourage means by which to act with agency outside of the online game environment by supporting discussion and learning. Through group learning affordances, the game could encourage players to connect outside of the game space to engage in discussion on the themes and topics the game intends to explore. Such external, non-game activities have been observed with other games that explored political and social themes, such as the game *Metal Gear Solid*, which deals with anti-nuclear and pacifist themes as well as the effects of war on civilians and military personnel. *Metal Gear Solid* is also known to have prompted vigorous discussion on these issues in the past across many online spaces and mediums (See Figure 5)(Huntemann, 2010; Iovanovici, 2010).



Figure 5. Screenshot from Metal Gear Solid 3.

To further encourage offline agency and learning, the game should also provide ways to expose players to real organizations and historical artifacts that support the themes of the game. Identifying organizations and resources that deal with economic, ethnic, and cultural issues and how players can become involved in those organizations will be a critical component of encouraging offline activities through online and digital activism. Knowledge developed through play would ideally influence player behavior outside of the game and lead to empowered activism against issues such as racism and sexism. Games such as *Darfur is Dying* provided means by which players could become involved with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) providing humanitarian aid across the world during that time period (Dahya, 2009). Related organizations for this game can also become additional stakeholders in support of the game's development that would afford potential financial and public relation advantages.

How this game idea will be developed is at the discretion of the designers and developers. This document only serves as a theoretical and speculative basis on which to build a future game idea.

Opportunities for Further Research

The use of games to advance social or political causes and ideologies is an emerging field. It would be prudent to observe what trends emerge and how game developers for social change navigate their contextual spaces. Existing games that are intended to address certain social and political issues that my work did not explore should also be examined for their potential value.

Therefore, a qualitative study on existing and successful mainstream game titles that have effective learning mechanics should be conducted. Themes and game mechanics that work well to encourage player learning could be coded for and analyzed for incorporation into future game design. A few popular games that

deal with social and political topics that come to mind are the *Mass Effect* and *Metal Gear Solid* series.

The *Mass Effect* series involves a multifaceted science fiction narrative that enables players to make numerous moral and social decisions that impact the game's outcome (See Figure 6). Players can pursue relationships with in-game characters as well as modify and develop unique player personas that have further in-game consequences. Studying how the *Mass Effect* series incorporates variable character development and narrative would be an excellent starting point for developing a similar game in which players can control a game's plot outcomes. The *Mass Effect* series is also notable for its positive representations of people of color and sexual and gender identity (Raymond, 2009).



Figure 6. Screenshot from *Mass Effect*.

As noted earlier, the *Metal Gear Solid* series of military action games is known to incorporate moral themes into its design and story. While not without its flaws, *Metal Gear Solid* and its sequels are immensely popular while simultaneously incorporating mature and serious themes into narrative and play. Gameplay is uniquely structured to discourage combat while the game's narrative touches on a myriad of subjects such as pacifism, the effect of war on civilians, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, nuclear deterrence, and forms of government. *Metal Gear Solid* is noted to be a trendsetter in terms of gameplay and cinematic presentation. In a sense, *Metal Gear Solid* plays upon the military genre ironically, incorporating violence into gameplay while simultaneously discouraging it and criticizing it. Studying how *Metal Gear Solid* plays into its controversial themes and seeks to prompt open and direct discussion on these issues will be useful for designing a game to tackle other critical issues such as violence, income inequality, and class inequality. Game developers can be interviewed to gain in-depth analysis of their mental models for developing games around issues important to them. Analysis of these games and how they align with their designer's activist or political goals is the key objective here.

The game idea pitched in this document should in no way serve to obscure other important social and political topic that could be served through video game design. It is encouraged that these other topics be explored for potential further activist video game development work. Research into how individuals navigate intersectional spaces of race, gender, and class can be conducted to form design requirements for a game intended to explore those topics and encourage learning and understanding as to effect social change. These can be examinations into existing ethnographic and anthropological studies or a new one altogether.

Other research activities can explore how people wish to have their identities and experiences portrayed in digital media such as video games. Following the mental models of people who experience the effects of systemic discrimination and prejudice to design contextualized game interactions will be valuable for communicating such topics to a wider audience and will make such communication more authentic in a sense that the digital tool is mediating the feelings, beliefs, and viewpoints of the target community.

Observational playtest studies on games that are developed for the purpose of effecting social and political change would also be effective for determining which game elements work and do not work, and how elements can be improved to ensure the game is not only enjoyable and engaging, but also effective at communicating its moral and social themes.

These are all rudimentary future methods intended to support future social activist and game design work. Interviews, observational ethnographic studies, and surveys would all be useful for eliciting data and designing requirements for games to support social and political ideologies. Games lie at the intersection of art, media, computer technology, culture, and social construction. They are without a doubt valuable cultural artifacts worthy of our time and attention, affording potentially great opportunities to mediate and share our experiences with others.

References

- Dahya, N. (2009). Serious Learning in Playful Roles: Socio-political games for education. *LGD*, 3(4).
- ESA. (2014, April 1). Computer and Video Game Industry - Essential Facts 2014. Retrieved March 12, 2015, from:

http://www.afjv.com/news/3705_computer-and-video-game-industry-essential-facts-2014.htm

Gee, J. (2012, March 21). James Paul Gee on Learning with Video Games.

Retrieved February 15, 2015, from:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnEN2Sm4IIQ>

Gittleson, K. (2014, June 13). Is the video game industry sexist? Retrieved

February 18, 2015, from: [http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-](http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-27824701)

[27824701](http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-27824701)

Huntemann, N. (2010). Joystick soldiers the politics of play in military video games. New York: Routledge.

Iovanovici, Z. (2010, June 11). Analysis: How Metal Gear Solid Teaches Us

About Technological Anxiety. Retrieved February 18, 2015, from:

http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/119836/Analysis_How_Metal_Gear_Solid_Teaches_Us_About_Technological_Anxiety.php

Meas, P. (2015, February 25). Supporting Activism Through Games. Retrieved March 11, 2015.

Meas, P (2015, January 28). Observing Indie Game Activity Contexts. Retrieved March 11, 2015.

Raymond, A. (2009, September 10). Beyond Gender Choice: Mass Effect's varied inclusiveness. Retrieved March 12, 2015, from:

<http://www.gamecritics.com/alex-raymond/beyond-gender-choice-mass-effects-varied-inclusiveness>

Screenshot, Darfur is Dying [Screenshot]. (2006). Retrieved February 25, 2015, from: <http://www.mobygames.com/images/shots/l/309461-darfur-is-dying-browser-screenshot-hiding-successfullys.png>

Screenshot, Mass Effect [Screenshot]. (2009). Retrieved March 11, 2015, from: http://geekspodcast.com/geekpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/mass_effect_dialogue.png

Screenshot, Metal Gear Solid 3 [Screenshot]. (2011). Retrieved March 11, 2015, from: <http://www.g4tv.com/images/4235/screenshots-metal-gear-solid-3d-snake-eater-e3-2011-screenshots/69268/>

Screenshot, Papers Please [Screenshot]. (2013). Retrieved March 11, 2015, from: <http://etgeekera.com/2013/08/16/papers-please-review-glory-to-arstotzka/papers-please-screenshot-01/>

Screenshot, Visual Novel Example [Screenshot]. (2014). Retrieved March 11, 2015, from: <http://pandaepan.deviantart.com/art/HG-Visual-Novel-Takahiro-s-Path-375751965>

Wingfield, N. (2014, October 15). Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats in 'GamerGate' Campaign. Retrieved February 25, 2015, from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/16/technology/gamergate-women-video-game-threats-anita-sarkeesian.html>