

## Postcard From The Serious Games Summit: How the United Nations Fights Hunger with *Food Force*

By Rusel DeMaria

The man behind a fascinating talk at the Serious Games Summit 2005 in Washington DC, Justin Roche is the program manager for the United Nations' first computer game – *Food Force* – which was conceived and developed by the World Food Programme – a frontline agency for fighting world hunger.

Roche began his talk by giving the audience a bit of background on the WFP. For instance, it is the world's largest humanitarian agency, but it also has a tremendous job to accomplish. At any given time, he said, there are more than 800 million people in hunger. The WFP feeds approximately 90 million people each year, 62 million of them children, in 80 countries. They also respond to disaster situations, recently in Pakistan and Guatemala, while continuing ongoing efforts to get food to the hungry.

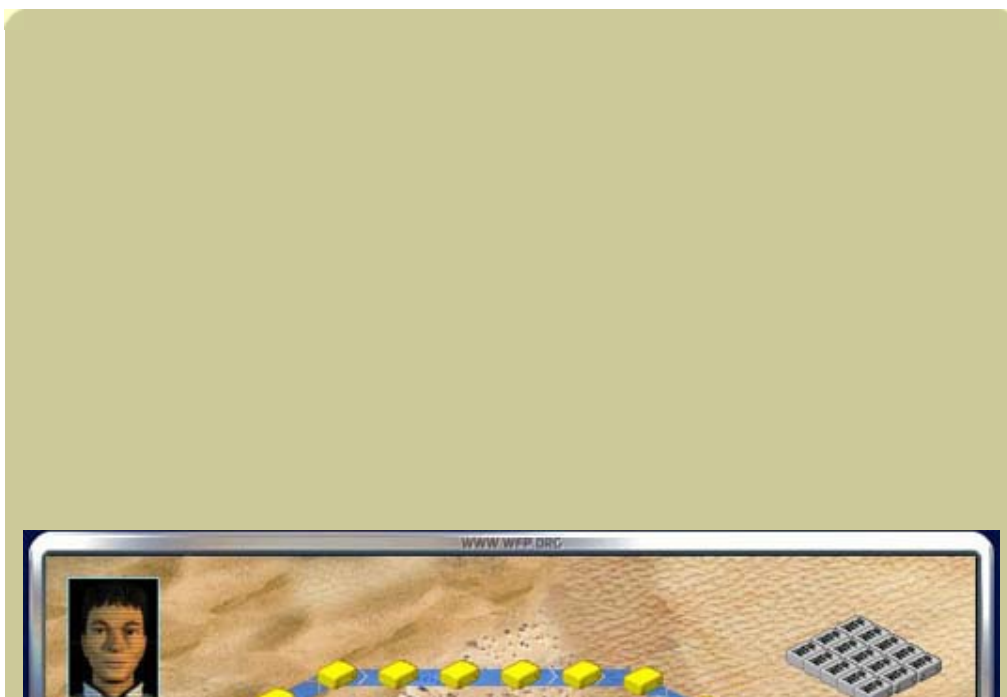
To accomplish their goals, the World Food Programme employs a fleet of 20 planes, 40 ships and 5000 trucks. They work in conjunction with other NGOs, such as the Red Cross, UNICEF and others. They are funded entirely by donations, with the United States being the largest donor. (Their [official website](#) actually shows a constantly updating list of who has donated money and where it is going.)

### The *Food Force* Concept?

So why did the U.N. develop a game? The idea was originally proposed by an Italian field worker named Paola Biocca, who died in the line of duty in Kosovo in 1999. The game is dedicated to her. It came from a belief that young people could learn from games... that "young people were left out of the discussion of world hunger." Roche added that every five seconds a child dies from hunger, and since Live Aid 20 years ago, the situation has gotten worse. "We will lose this fight if we don't do something about it. We decided that we needed to target future decisions makers."

One of the challenges was how to create a game that would engage kids and accomplish their goals on virtually no budget. It was agreed that money for this project could not come at the expense of their main humanitarian efforts, so it took a lot of time, dedication and the generosity of others to get the job done. The project was amortized over 2.5-3 years. "We knew we had to develop a game exciting enough for kids to get engaged. We spent about \$5000 on consulting about gaming and decided that it was worth going forward. Of course, when we started we didn't think it would take so long."

In the end, they took their concepts and storyboards to an Italian game developer named Depend, who implemented the project with Macromedia Director and donated some of their time and technology. In the end, the project cost approximately \$475,000. "By that time, we knew it was going to work; the vision was there."





## Saving Sheylan

The target audience for *Food Force* is kids from 8-13. Structured as a race against time in the fictional country of Sheylan, the game is divided into six missions that fairly accurately represent what the WFP does in the real world, despite its fictional setting. The six missions are:

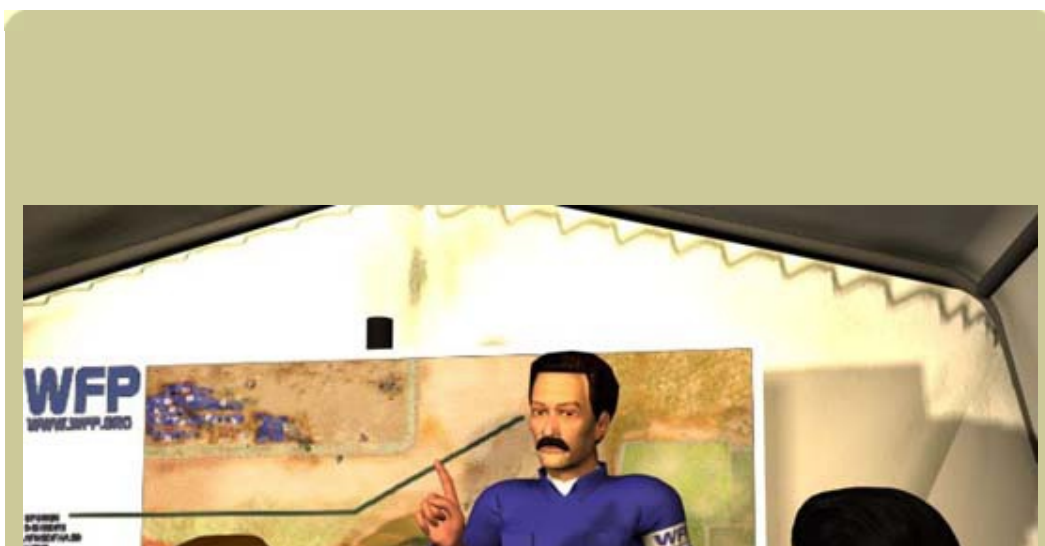
1. Air surveillance
2. Food formulation
3. Food acquisition – buying and selling food
4. Air drops from helicopters
5. Ground missions involving driving trucks through sometimes hostile territories
6. Future farming – establishing self-sufficiency

The plan was always to distribute the game free online, but some people, Roche included, were concerned that people would not be willing or able to download a 200 megabyte file. The success of *America's Army* changed that and gave them confidence to go forward with their preferred distribution method. The results could not have been more surprising, or more gratifying.

When they launched the project, the BBC did a story on it, which got picked up very quickly by other media. "Our servers went down within the first ten minutes of launch," said Roche. "We knew we couldn't handle the load, so we went to Yahoo for hosting, and they very quickly said, 'Yeah, no problem.' We owe a big thank you to Yahoo, who are still donating server space and hosting downloads."

To date, the game has been downloaded more than 2.1 million times, with more than 10 million impressions. It reached the million download mark within six weeks of launch. It has even been the number one action adventure on apple.com. The product has been localized in Japan, where the Japanese version was downloaded more than 140,000 times in less than a week. It is also being localized in China, with a famous pop star donating his voiceover talent. Roche hopes to produce other versions in Spanish, Portuguese and Hindi.

Distribution worldwide is being donated by companies such as UbiSoft in France, Konami in Japan, RAI Television in Italy and TNT Corporation in the Netherlands. Roche explains why these companies are all donating their services. "It's a good deal for them to get onboard. You can consider this part of your social responsibility and brand identification. It's good for their image."





### **Beyond *Food Force***

But Food Force doesn't stop at the game. The *Food Force* website ([www.food-force.com](http://www.food-force.com)) has a wealth of ongoing content, including message boards, guides and useful links for teachers; information about current situations around the world; ways to launch fundraising campaigns, advocate and take action against world hunger; an interactive world hunger map; places for kids to compare their scores and more. And apparently it's working. "It's amazing," Roche told us, "how often kids play this game and then tell us they want to come work for a humanitarian organization like the WFP. And we've seen kids do their own fundraising, selling cookies at their schools, for instance. "

The Food Force team also has established several partnerships, including Scholastic, National Geographic, Yahoo, the American Federation of Teachers, the International Food Policy Institute and Internet2, with whom they are working on an international *Food Force* contest.

So what about the future of *Food Force*? Roche says they want to do another version – possibly a multiplayer version, but they will need funding and partners. He said they are working on a budget for the sequel and considering a variety of new content ideas. They are also considering distribution of the game on CD-ROMs to further extend its influence. "My vision is to that kids would have the opportunity to play *Food Force* in every classroom in the world," he told us.

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