

Computer games and their role in international
development policy decision making.

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An obscure topic to be sure, but one that I feel should not be ignored. Computer game players (“players”) are increasingly being presented with games which place them in incredibly immersive environments where they are challenged to take a city, civilization or tribe from the proverbial “rags to riches total-world-domination” (“political strategy games”) or are pitted against stereotyped and homogenized enemy “others” where the only route to victory is kill or be killed (“action” or “shoot-em-up” games). While the debate on *what* players learn from these, and the moral evaluation of those lessons, are often topics of debate, the fact that there is indeed learning going on is rarely challenged. This note will look specifically at how lessons on politics and development policy – methods, theories and execution – can be learned and internalized and how, I believe, these lessons stand to affect “real world” politics in the not so distant future.

Does Game-Mediated Learning Actually Happen?

While I make the assumption that learning does in fact happen on a constant basis in games, it is such a central concept to the following text that at least a minimal explanation is necessary as background. At a very base level, games tell players a story – they have a plot, set within a defined and immersive fictional world, with a beginning and an end point. The medium of stories has been used as a learning tool for centuries, fables, fairy tales and even extensive political treatise all tell stories which are deeply imbedded with lessons. To exclude the storyline of a game, no matter how shallow one may find it, from this tradition of learning would be a mistake. At a more complex level, game worlds are designed to be immersive alternate realities which engage and envelope

the player who, in order to succeed, must assume the role, rules and even culture provided by that game world.

Statistics suggest that a player is immersed in a game world for as many as 3000 hours over their High School and College careers¹ compared to perhaps 6000-7000 hours spent in classrooms. When fully half as much time is spent in an alternate world, learning alternate rules and cultures, as is spent in “formal learning” we can see where the lessons in games can be as formidable as lessons in the classroom in formative learning.

The power of games as teaching tools is so strong and well recognized that they are used as training tools by all branches of the military², by psychologists in therapy³, and are even being considered for direct use in the classroom⁴.

What is learned?

There is much literature on how games can teach players to be violent, or to assume certain gender roles⁵, or even to improve hand-eye coordination, but what I will focus on here is what players learn about politics and policy in a developmental context. As such, I will be focusing on “action” and “political strategy” games which represent just under 50% of the computer game market by games sold⁶.

Let me start with action games. The ubiquitous and always correct Wikipedia.com notes that “Action games typically feature violent physical force, especially shooting, as

¹ Calculated using data available from the ESA: <http://www.theesa.com>

² DoD Game Developers' Community; <http://www.dodgamecommunity.com/>

³ The War on Terror; Wired Magazine; August 2006; pp96-100

⁴ Teaching with Games; <http://www.futurelab.org.uk/research/teachingwithgames/findings.htm>

⁵ For example, see From Barbie(r) to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games; eds. Justine Cassell, Henry Jenkins; MIT press; 2000

⁶ I am combining here what the ESA defined as action, shooter, role playing and strategy games under two meta genres. Statistics are taken from Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry, 2005; <http://theesa.com/archives/files/Essential%20Facts%202006.pdf>

their main interactive feature.”⁷ That action games are violent, for purposes of this paper, is not necessarily a bad thing. What is worrying, instead, is against whom, where and why the player is using violence and what goal they are trying to reach. The storylines of this type of game generally revolve around *American* (or other “Western”) forces saving some country or another from the “evil threat” of a stereotyped *non-western* force. To generalize, there has been a periodic trend in the evolution of role the “evil other” over the years that has followed geo-political realities – that is, during the cold war, the “evil threat” was that of communist Russia, after the cold war it shifted onto to China and North Korea, now we are seeing Arab and (usually Muslim) Fundamentalist terrorists featuring heavily in action games⁸. So, what we are seeing is a trend where players are spending a significant amount of time having the message that “this meta-group of people are bad and must be killed” re-enforced in their minds and that, as Henry Kissinger (in the role of a presidential advisor) suggested recently, “victory [is] the only meaningful exit strategy.”⁹ As was noted above, these provide lessons that many claim are in fact learnable from games, and when it comes to situations like Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and North Korea, it can be argued that this indoctrination will influence, at least to some degree, the choice of which we fight, when, where and how...and indeed, what is an acceptable “exit.” I would further argue that this primarily happens through a shift in publicly perceived acceptability towards violent “hit 'em hard and hit 'em now” responses and away from longer term diplomatic negotiations – especially in vocal democracies where public *opinion* and *perception* is so important to political parties.

⁷ A degree of sarcasm is intended here – I couldn't write a paper in this day and age without referring to Wikipedia and/or 'google university' now could I? http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Action_games

⁸Of course, there is always the traditional and popular “aliens invading earth” storyline but even that can be analyzed in a political sense, but is too deep of one to go into in such a short space.

⁹From Bob Woodward's book State of Denial; taken from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5393964.stm>

Now let me shift to more overtly political strategy games. These games facilitate a much more straight forward argument, at least a basic one which will have to do for now. Marc Prensky argues that a player learns from a game through a process in which “[the games] make a player, no matter what his or her age, reflect...and compare the game to what they already know about life...[and] wildly unfair or inaccurate rules get quickly identified by players as "bogus"”¹⁰ and presumably *visa-versa* as well with believable rules getting a “stamp of approval.” Now this argument works well, *if the player has any sort of sounding board to compare against*, but how many computer game players have any developmental policy knowledge to compare to other than what other games have previously provided them and their own common sense? Not many. Thus, when “Civ clone” after “Civ clone” and “Sim” game after “Sim” game get released with essentially the same route to 'development', it makes sense that a player would accept that as reality, because that is all they know. Interesting though, what we often find is that in games with an international or opposing-civilization dimension where the player is given a choice between war and diplomacy, guess which one is easier to win with – that's right: war – once again re-enforcing the acceptability of a “decisive strike” or “shock and awe” military tactics over complex political deals and negotiations. Now, I'm not saying that these games are only bad – on the contrary, Civilization (and all it's clones, and successors) encouraged balanced budgets and an emphasis on education and research – hardly bad things by today's standards of development thinking. All I am implying here is that, with little or no background or real world knowledge or experience, players are learning development policy from pixels and blanket rulesets designed by a computer

¹⁰ What Kids Learn from Video Games <http://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/conf2001/papers/prensky.html>

programmer who probably didn't have all that much background in development themselves.

How this affects development policy decisions.

Clearly it would be a mistake to even suggest that computer games are the be all and end all of development policy decision making. But, when “it's boom time for an industry now even bigger than Hollywood”¹¹ that is taking in US\$11bn a year in revenue and growing as fast as 11% a year¹² that's a fair bit of lobbying power and consumer interest. And it's not just the 15-35 white male market that is eating all of this up any more either. Game designers are making a conscious effort to design for women because, according to new research “70 percent of casual gamers are females over the age of 40”¹³ who also, incidentally, make up the largest voting group by age and gender in the UK and the second largest in the US¹⁴. So, if we look at who is currently playing games, what kind of games they are playing, who political parties are targeting and how they are doing it¹⁵, we see a convergence of factors that all add up to the potential for games to be a source of significant public influence vis-a-vis international development policy choices.

¹¹They got game; San Fransisco Chronicle; December 18, 2004; <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/chronicle/archive/2004/12/18/MNGUOAE36I1.DTL>

¹²Global Video and Computer Gaming Report Summary - July 2005
<http://www.mindbranch.com/listing/product/R334-0182.html>

¹³Gameworld: Older women rule ... the casual games market; Reuters;
Sep 28, 2006

¹⁴ UK stats from Voting turnout: by age and gender: Social Trends 32 Nations Statistics;
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=5204>

US states from Projections of the Population of Voting Age, for States, by Sex, Race, and Selected Ages; U.S. Bureau of the Census; <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/voting/proj/votepg1.txt>

¹⁵See From media politics to e-protest; Alan Scott and John Street (5201 coursepack)