



CAN "SERIOUS GAMES" IMPROVE YOUR MIND?

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Long criticized for distracting students from their homework and fostering violence, some video game designers are now developing games that help students deal with real-world situations such as managing the International Space Station or negotiating peace in the Middle East.

"Serious games as a concept refers to games that are used for practical purposes," said Jamil Moledina, the organizer of the Serious Games Summit, a series of conventions held in the United States and Europe that bring together developers in the industry.

Moledina thinks the name is problematic. "That's what's wrong with the name 'serious games' -- they use the fun element of a game but in a way that's productive."

What are "serious games"?

The basic concept behind all video games is to allow the player to control the events of a particular character and force him or her to connect and manipulate information to move on to the next level. Each level is designed to be hard enough to be just doable, creating simultaneous feelings of pleasure and frustration that draw people in.

In entertainment games, this could mean learning how to stay alive in the drug underworld or save a far away planet from an army of aliens.

Serious games take the same concept a step further by allowing players to act as problem solvers, political leaders or humanitarian workers while learning information that might otherwise come from a textbook or lecture.

"You can go inside the role instead of reading about it in a book," said Asi Burak, an educational game producer, at the Serious Games Summit in Washington, D.C.

Burak is part of a team working on PeaceMaker, a game that seeks to teach high school and college students about the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Instead of conquest and destruction, players try to achieve peace and cohabitation -- an arguably much harder goal. The game should be finished in the spring of 2006 and teachers are already asking for copies to use in the classroom.

Unexpected learning

What makes these games attractive to use in a workplace or classroom is that the games are real-life situations and build practical skills for tomorrow's leaders.

"You are not playing with fantasy creatures. You are playing with real human beings," said Burak.

Eric Keylor, a computer programmer on the PeaceMaker team says teachers must accept games as a legitimate way to teach and learn.

“Games are it,” said Keylor. “It is now the dominant art form of the 21st century. They are and will be the dominant medium for the foreseeable future.”

“Gaming is the most insidious type of learning that there can possibly be,” said Johnny Wilson, the former editor-in-chief of Computer Gaming Magazine at a Serious Games workshop two years ago. “It’s unexpected learning, it’s learning you get as a byproduct of the experience.”

While educators such as Bernard Cesarone of the University of Illinois point out that there is little hard evidence that games have a positive impact, the developers insist on their educational value.

Fight world hunger and manage astronauts

According to Moledina, games were first used as training tools on Wall Street in the 1970s as stock market simulators. Around the same time, the army began using war games to train soldiers. Today, the most popular game on the market is America’s Army, an official U.S. Army game that teaches about fighting tactics and boasts over six million players.

Recently games have expanded from training into education.

Food Force is a game designed by the United Nations World Food Program to teach children ages 8-13 about world hunger. The game simulates a country threatened by a hunger crisis. Acting as a humanitarian aid worker, the player must complete a series of missions to plan and complete a successful emergency response.

Food Force has been downloaded over 2 million times since its launch at www.food-force.com.

“It’s been kind of a surprise for us. It just took off,” said Jennifer Parmelee, a spokeswoman for the U.N.’s food program in the Washington Post.

Another example is SpaceStationSim, a game developed with the National Aeronautic Space Administration, or NASA, that conveys the challenges of managing astronauts aboard the International Space Station.

But can serious games make money?

MTV recently announced a contest that challenges students to combine technology and activism to teach about the crisis in Sudan. The Darfur Digital Activist Contest will award \$50,000 to an individual or group of college students that designs interactive media project or game to educate about the genocide in Darfur.

While nobody expects serious games to take over the game industry, they are becoming more popular and designers like Keylor and Burak say that someday they will become a lasting component of the \$6.9 billion game market.

And they will need to make a profit to keep creating new games and attract talented designers. “It’s all about money,” said Burak.

--By Anna Shoup for NewsHour Extra

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