

Games for Change: A Cultural studies and social impact gaming dialogue

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Introduction

Angela McRobbie 'In Defence of Cultural studies' suggests "the question of what cultural studies is, or should be, has occupied too much time and taken up too much space" (1999: 203). She goes on to suggest that "more refreshing is the work which gets on with the job, combining clear-headed political analysis with an understanding of the importance of cultural forms" (ibid.). Reflecting on this, this paper will introduce the *Games for Change* movement and examples of social impact gaming (necessarily limited for this publication) around which this movement is orientated. Many of these games bring together political analysis with an understanding of the importance of cultural forms, and in doing so present an instructive challenge to Cultural studies. Framed in relation to this broader question of how social impact games may offer a form for exploring and doing Cultural studies, this paper will specifically suggest how cultural studies discussions of design and user practices may usefully be drawn on to inform understandings of games design and explore how such an approach may be used to consider potential influences in designing digital games.

Games for change

Games 4 Change, as their website outlines, formed in 2004 as a sub-group of the Serious Games Initiative founded at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington, D.C.. *G4C* "provides support, visibility and shared resources to organizations and individuals using digital games for social change" and "is the primary community of practice for those interested in making digital games about the most pressing issues of our day, from poverty to race and the environment" (online). This description was refined for a 2007 salon at Parsons New School for Design (NY) and identified the movement as the "international nexus for visibility, community and practice" and provided details of programming efforts to open up avenues of

distribution, shape public dialogue, engage with institutions and foundations and provide a festival” (Games for Change, 2007) .

Games for change and social impact gaming

To contextualise digital games within Cultural studies traditions, Crawford and Rutter’s chapter ‘Digital Games and Cultural studies’ offers an instructive overview. In a discussion of the legacy of the Birmingham School and the potential for subversive reading, they note “digital games often provide the gamer with multiple opportunities to (some degree) change and adapt the game to fit their personal interests and tastes either via the options built into the game, or via more ‘illegitimate’ methods, such as ‘hacking’ or modifying games” (2006: 154). This reference to the modification of games to change and adapt is extremely significant with regard to social impact gaming and I will introduce the *Escape from Woomera* game as illustration.

As background Dovey and Kennedy in their discussion of the game describe how “in 2001/02, the conditions in the actual Woomera camp had become a national scandal in Australia, with frequent hunger strikes and famously a mass breakout in 2002” (2006: 126). *Escape from Woomera (EFW)* utilises the “familiar environment of a first person, 3D action-adventure game” and is “intended to be an engine for mobilising experiences and situations otherwise inaccessible to a nation of disempowered onlookers” (online). *EFW* is a total conversion modification of the *Half Life* game and in doing so signals practices of change and adaptation. Rather than the personal interests and tastes that Crawford and Rutter introduce in reference to game modification, this *Half Life* modification is not deployed to construct a fantasy game world but to create the “spirit-sapping conditions of this [Woomera] harsh and unforgiving environment” (ibid.). Perspectives of subversion and adaptation as part of a political commentary resonate between Cultural studies concerns associated with the Birmingham School and politically engaged game modifiers and designers.

In turn, it is vital not to overlook that as well as potential meetings of concerns with regard to certain issues there are disparate and opposing motivations.

For example, the *Social Impact Games* website notes that a number of their catalogued games “have themes and portray ideas that are offensive to many people” (online). For example, the Resistance Records developed *Ethnic Cleansing* in which “the protagonist (the player can choose either a skinhead or a Klansman) runs through a ghetto murdering black people, before descending into a subway system to murder Jews”. Everett notes the tension between divergent uses in suggesting that *Ethnic Cleansing* and the associated related “recruiting [of] youths to the ideology of hate does not exactly embody [a] progressive imperative” (2005: 321).

Given the diversity of games addressing social change and that these games would not exclusively engage with a politically progressive Cultural studies mission, my concern turns to more broadly framed potential Cultural studies contributions.

Thoughtful criticism

Initial offerings come from Henry Jenkins when he states, “without the support of an informed public and the perspective of thoughtful critics, game developers may never realise their potential” (2000). For Jenkins, “thoughtful criticism can marshal support for innovation and experimentation in industry, much as good film criticism helps focus attention on neglected independent film” (2005: 187). This approach meets to some degree with Connor’s suggestion that “best way for cultural studies to be renewed or productively transformed would probably be for it continue in its dutiful, wearisome way, identifying anxiety, affirming identity, celebrating plurality, seizing on contradictions, squeezing out subversions” (2003: 217). A task for Cultural studies with regard to games would be critique and to contribute to the possibilities for the medium and for social impact games to contribute to specific political discussions, such as refugee centres. This approach echoes with Janet Murray’s ‘The Ivory Tower’ article hosted by the International Game Developers Association. For Murray, “a tradition of self-reflection helps to professionalize design practice, taking it away from the limited horizon of the next profitable game, and focusing on the career-sized goals of expanding the power of the medium itself” (2003: online). Again, returning to Connor ‘the

seizing on contradictions' and 'squeezing out [of] subversions' may be a way to offer up approaches to engaging with politics through game play. I leave this potential approach here to bring together two further comments by Murray and Connor.

Pooling knowledge and attending to use and design

For Murray, in noting the possibility of academic contributions to design practice,

an academic discourse does not replace the apprenticeship culture of game designers, any more than film school replaced the apprenticeship culture of filmmakers. It merely augments it, accelerating the transmission process, and providing a more precise discourse. Academic discourse expands the circle of influence and offers new practitioners a more extensive palette
(2003: online)

The address here is towards how academic research and games design may come together through the opening up of new vocabularies and language to 'pool knowledge'. It is with the meeting of academia and design practice that I wish to continue in suggesting a dialogue that could offer potentially revealing insights for games design and Cultural studies.

For Connor, "people in academic life who think they are making important political differences for the most part fail to recognise that they are just marching in step with much more powerful forces that are making real differences" (2003: 208). The significance of contribution beyond 'marching in step' has animated writers discussing the establishment of a Game studies discipline. Espen Aarseth in a discipline defining article suggests Game studies "should exist as an independent academic structure, because it cannot be reduced to any of [Media Studies, Sociology and English] "to name but a few"]" (2001: online). He goes on to say "if we are successful, we can actually contribute both constructively and critically, and make a difference outside the academy" (2001: online). The Cultural studies tradition of exploring interpretation and negotiation of meaning by audiences, consumers, players, users and so on I suggest, when attentive to the kind of concerns raised by Morris and Sotamaa around overstating political resistance, can be

the basis for considering translations around categories of design and production and use and consumption. This may be to bring academic investigation and discourse to contribute constructively and critically to understanding the potential of social impact gaming.

The duality of design and use

An account that recognizes that the designer is at the same time a user and a producer is a consumer is incisive for considering how broader contexts and situations inform action. Specifically with regard to this paper's focus, how social impact gaming in being 'games' are situated within complex and changing affiliations and relations with other games. A further tracing of Cultural studies approaches will be helpful in drawing this out.

In their introductory chapter to *How Users Matter: The Co-Construction of Users and Technologies*, Cultural and Media studies are noted by Oudshoorn and Pinch for acknowledging the study of users (2003). Following their overview that takes in contributions including Lury, Baudrillard, Storey, du Gay et al, Hall and Lie and Sorensen, they state "cultural and media studies thus articulate a perspective on user-technology relations that emphasizes the role of technological objects in creating and shaping social identities, social life, and culture at large" (2003: 13) and suggest "cultural and media studies inspire us to transcend the artificial divide between design and use" (2003: 16). I follow this lead in considering how the notions of design and use can be explored in terms of their mutuality.

Social impact gaming across contexts

In returning to the social impact gaming context of this paper, I would suggest to explore the potential avenues for social impact gaming is to situate this form of gaming in relation to digital gaming more broadly and explore how this field of gaming may inspire new forms of gaming. A similar move has been suggested in relation to games and education, with Dumbleton suggesting "if we are to succeed in translating features of games design into educational products effectively and repeatedly, then games need to be understood as entertainment products that engage their audiences in a wide variety of ways"

(2007: 60). The overview of Cultural studies offered in this paper has emphasized that recognizing audience/player engagements is part of exploring the complex dynamics around game design. The particular focus on the co-practice of play and design could prove a useful additive to the values in design framework introduced by Flanagan, Howe and Nissenbaum (2005).

The values in design approach outlines that “we must study the complex interplay between the system or device, those who built it, what they had in mind, its conditions of use, and the natural, cultural, social and political context in which it is embedded (Nissenbaum, 2001: 117) and, particularly brings to the fore the ways in which artefacts “can embody political, social, and ethical values” (Flanagan et al, 2005: online). A further move in this direction is to see how play and consumption informs design; how diverse cues, hints, models, inspirations, objects and practices inform design. In relation to social impact gaming, this may be to position and situate social impact gaming within and across digital gaming.

This move is already well under way with the efforts of the *Games 4 Change* movement. As noted earlier, this movement seeks to offer international visibility and “open up avenues of distribution, shape public dialogue, engage with institutions and foundations and provide a festival” (online). A wider engagement with the games industry can be variously traced and these endeavours are part of a broadening of what games can be do and be about. These efforts are not unique to digital gaming, for example the New Games Movement in the 1970s (see Ludica), nor uncharted, for example Chris Crawford’s 1986 *Balance of Power* sought to position the player across both sides of the cold war to foster an understanding of diverse perspectives. With *G4C* moreover, there is a momentum and impetus to bring social impact gaming into conversation with political action and digital gaming at large.

In relation to commercial gaming, Tim Carter suggests “serious game projects give us an opportunity to revitalize the creative dimension of entertainment

game design” (2006). Carter suggests “many would agree the commercial games industry is now very inbred in its thinking, with constant rehashes of old ideas, a reliance on “brand-focus”, movie tie-ins, sequels, technology-for-gameplay, meaningless (as opposed to meaningful) violence, and other surrogates for creative vision in game design” (2006). He goes on to suggest “the field of serious games – with its intrinsic creative encounter of game developer and non-game professional [...] could offer itself as a form of “outside help” to entertainment game creators” (2006). This projection around developer and non-professional is quite specific, and the notion of outside help is more helpful here. Outside help points to the mainstream games industry approach to innovation and the investment in new ideas¹. The potential range of sources of outside help emerged strongly through research conducted with games students who highlighted how films, books and art are all sources of inspiration and ideas informing their own game design. Clearly also, other games too are an obvious source of inspiration. This was highlighted by one student in a focus group who stated:

every brief that we have had so far [...] I always have sort of had to think of something that I have seen before or incorporate that with a kind of twist [...] I think that is what people do in games, they go along, and find something that has been used before but twist it round. It keeps going on like that.
(Author focus group, 2007)

Offering a different perspective, but one that still indicates the affirmation of using existing games, a student stated “I get my initial idea from out of literature and out of my head, my imagination, then I develop the idea through old games” (Author focus group, 2007). Games are iterative. They offer inspiration for designers: a way to anchor ideas, to generate new ideas, and to bring together ideas. As the *G4C* movement works towards increasing the visibility of the diverse engagements with digital gaming, new topics for games and gameplay mechanics emerge for designers to incorporate and twist.

Kline et al suggest the seemingly paradoxical quality of innovation lies in that

¹ This stance on innovation must be addressed critically and care taken to recognise risk aversion strategies employed by publishers and developers to.

it arises in a predetermined institutional and (sub)cultural context along a sanctioned and funded research trajectory; and yet it is radical, formative, original, and unique to the group that develops it and comes to influence the future evolution of both technology and culture” (Kline et al, 2003: 88)

Addressing social impact gaming as an innovation in gaming form requires asking who is influenced and how. In identifying innovation, as Barry suggests, “it is quite possible to think of invention which is not technical [and] just because an object or device is new does not make it an invention” (1999/2000: 63). He suggests

what is inventive is not the novelty of artefacts in themselves, but the novelty of the arrangements with other activities and entities within which artefacts are situated, and might be situated in the future (1999/2000: 63)

Games 4 Change subsequently may be seen as innovating game design through the visibility it gives to social impact games and highlighting how games can be situated within diverse debates such as Darfur and Woomera.

Conclusions

To begin to explore possible ‘future evolutions’ or where games may be situated, is a task that Cultural studies can help to address through conceptualising and prompting exploration of the duality of design and play. Particular and unique processes and experiences of playing games inform game design. These may be ways of building a level, modelling a character, developing a greek mythology or confronting the pressing issues of our day. Whilst the question of how social impact games may suggest new ways of doing Cultural studies must be left for further discussion, this paper has hoped to highlight how Cultural studies approaches may contribute to the refreshing political analysis that these games seek to offer by exploring how use and adaptation can be drawn on to trace and inform design practices.

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