Serious by Design?

A study on serious game designers and their perspectives on serious games

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--- Extended Abstract ---

1. Introduction - The rhetoric behind Serious Games

The hopeful and, at times, unsubstantiated rhetoric surrounding the potentials of serious games has reached a new level in recent years: It is claimed that "*Gaming can make a better world*" (McGonigal 2011) and that serious games can "*support psychotherapy of children and adolescents*" (Brezinka 2007); *"be used to complement a traditional curriculum"* (Popescu 2012 et all.); *"change consumer decisions about energy consumption"* (Reeves and Armel 2010); "*help people function more effectively*" (McGowan and Pecheux 2011), *"and make you smarter[1]"*. These beliefs, expectations and facts concerning the potentials of serious games are causing controversies between game designers, marketing firms, governmental agencies, researchers, educators, the media, and the general public. Even though first studies on the impacts of games for social change were conducted in the last decade (Clark 2007; Janz and Joyce 2010, Peng, Lee and Heeter 2010) systematical knowledge on their effectiveness is still lacking (Mitgutsch 2011). Nevertheless, the term *serious games* is in use and the hopes of their effectiveness is flourishing. Thereby the development of these games offers novel design challenges and opens new financial opportunities for game designers. As Ian Bogost (2011) briefly describes *"(the term serious games) has given its advocates a way to frame the uses of games in governmental and industrial contexts, by making the claim that games can tackle consequential topics and provide profound results."*[2] In this sense serious games claim to be purpose-driven playful environments intended to impact the players beyond the self-contained aim of the game. But while the serious game advocates and their critics dispute the possible potentials and obvious limits, we know little about what the makers of these serious games think about their creations. The following study intends to give leading serious games designers a voice to express their perspectives – a perspective that might surprise both advocates and critics of serious games.

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[1] http://cnn.com/2011/TECH/gaming.gadgets/01/31/video.games.smarter.steinberg/index.html
[2] http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134735/

In the proposed paper, results of a qualitative study on 15 leading serious game designers and their perspectives on serious games will be outlined and discussed. Designers from serious games companies including *Eyebeam, Powerful Robot Games, News Game, ImpactGames, Games 4 Change, Digitalmill, Littleloud, Gamelab, PETLab, The Cat and the Coup, Persuasive Games, Serious Games Interactive, Molleindustria, Education Arcade* and *Take Action Games* were interviewed. These in-depth semi-structured interviews aimed to uncover what the initial experiences of serious game designers with "serious" games were and how they made sense of the concept of serious games. Furthermore, best and worse experiences in designing serious games will be explored and lessons learned will be outlined. In addition, expectations about the impacts of their games from a creator's point of view will be discussed and the general rhetoric surrounding serious games addressed. The study demonstrates that serious game designers have well-established, critical and reflective perspectives on what their games can and cannot do. It is also reveals that the line between artistic expression and instructional design is a thin one and that the "serious" interpretation of games does not always meet the designers intentions. Finally, the study gives insights into the potentials and limits of serious games and future potentials for their development.

2. The Method

After extensive literature reviews about serious game design and research and learning impacts pivotal questions about serious game design and potentials were collected and considered by different experts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2011. On this basis 15 leading serious game designers were approached via e-mail and invited to participate in the outlined study. The interviews were conducted in person or via Skype between June 2011 and July 2012 and took between 1 and 3 hours. The names of the designers are anonymized and interpersonal experiences are compared with repeating patterns throughout the interviews.

5. Literature

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