Serious Gaming Essay

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1. Introduction

This essay will focus on Serious Gaming. The essay will start with a short introduction of examples of serious games and the ideas behind them. The main focus will however be about the societal impact of serious games and its ethical and moral aspects, and will scratch the surface of the philosophical aspects of serious gaming. In any case, the best way to experience and get information about serious games is to play them, an experience which simply can not be captured fully (or at all?) in words on paper. Breaking the rules is part of the game (Charsky, 2010).

2. Serious Games

A broad range of serious games exist. Often when someone refers to serious games, it is about computer games used to reach a more serious goal than mere entertainment (Susi et al., 2007). However, in very nature itself, playful behaviour is used to learn certain skills necessary for survival. Just think about young animals (and humans too), fighting and playing with their siblings or parents. That behaviour is a way to learn how to survive in the ‘real’ world.

Either in nature or on a computer, serious gaming has its advantages. It allows the player to experiences situations and learn about those situations, that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to create in the real world, for various reasons, such as costs, time, safety, etc. (Squire and Jenkins, 2003). Simulators of all kinds enable users to experience ‘the real thing’, without the costs and other issues that real life experiencing brings, such as flight simulators or military simulators.

Other serious games let users experiment with the rules and the virtual world, to learn about those rules, such as in a game to learn about scientific laws (Charsky, 2010). By creating situations where the user can change certain parameters and see the effect of those changes, the learned concepts should be better adopted. This is the constructivist philosophy of education, which is the basis of many serious games (Dickey, 2005).

3. Societal Impact

The societal impact of serious gaming has two sides. Firstly there is the often heard disadvantages of gaming in general. Numerous issues concerning
health (headaches, fatigue, RSI), effects of violence (aggressive behaviour) and psycho-social issues (depressions, social isolation, less positive attitude towards society in general), etc. (Mitchell and Savill-Smith, 2004) are often cited, also in academic research. However, at the same time, research shows positive impacts. Mitchell and Savill-Smith (2004) state that games in general can support the development of a number of skills; analytical and spatial skills, strategic skills and insight, motor skills, eye-hand coordination etc. Even violent games can be beneficial by alleviating frustration/stress. The added goals of serious gaming of course add more benefits (assuming the serious games actually reach their goals). For example, Squire and Jenkins (2003) mention that games (in this case Civilization 3) can be a powerful way of introducing new concepts (such as monotheism and monarchy) and tie together disparate periods of history.

The aforementioned advantages and disadvantages are mainly focused on individual impact. Serious games however can also have an impact on society as a whole. Serious gaming changes the way we learn and look at education. Through playing games, we can learn essential skills and knowledge. In today's society, evermore focused on quick information, people need to have certain skills to comprehend everything that is happening. It is not clear if people who did not grow up with technology and games will have the skill to quickly search for information and process all the information that is being fired at them.

Furthermore, apart from education, serious games can be deployed to solve certain societal problems. Thompson (2006) talks about a serious game1 where the player can play as either the Israelis or the Palestinians, in an attempt to solve the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. When this game was shown to either of the two subject groups, they were only interested in playing ‘themselves’. When Thompson (2006) pushed them to switch positions, they developed a more nuanced feeling of why the other side acted as it did. So, not only does the game allow people to learn about the conflict – ‘more than from reading 10 years of newspapers’ (Thompson, 2006) – it also made two opposing groups form an understanding of the other’s motives and choices. Another example given by Thompson (2006) is the game ‘September 12’2. It didn’t really train a skill or teach about history, it was not even enjoyable, but it was a way to fuel the debate about the Iraq war. In this case these two games focus on the Middle East, but the same principle could apply to societal problems closer to home, such as loitering youth.

One last example is a game that creates a living world, where characters go about their daily lives, to allow the player to experience other cultures and get a feeling for cultural differences (Zielke et al., 2009). Especially in our present day multi-cultural society, this can be an important aspect.

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1http://www.peacemakergame.com/
2http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm
4. Ethical and Moral Aspects of Serious Gaming

There are certain ethical and moral aspects about serious gaming that should be considered. For instance, research on serious gaming used for educational purposes in organizations (Malheiros et al., 2011), showed that employees were afraid that data about their training could be used by colleagues or HR managers at their disadvantage. Furthermore, employees were afraid to be singled out, thinking they would be the first to be fired if there results were bad and the company had to shrink.

The fact that this is even possible raises some questions. Even though the concerns raised by the employees might not happen, it is still an issue. Privacy should be maintained in such a way, that this can never happen. Another issue Malheiros et al. (2011) noted, is that if an employee is under pressure to use the learning system, there is no true consent even if he signs a form.

Moral can play a big role in (serious) games (Zagal, 2009). Some games give the player a choice between two options they morally ought to do, but cannot be done both (Gowans, 1987). Ethical questions are difficult to project on games. How can we decide if a game itself is good or bad in a moral sense? A game can be morally bad for its violent nature, but good in that it teaches gamers certain skills (Reynolds, 2002). According to Zagal (2009), the act of playing a game does not inherently trivialize the issues it tackles and thus does not render any game about a serious topic inherently unethical. This means (serious) games can be used to teach users about ethics and morality. However, the ethics and morality the game teaches will always be those of the developer/designer of the game, as they decide how to implement the ethics and which choices to give the players. Of course, this does not differ a lot from the ‘real’ world, where for instance parents teach their children their own ethics and morals. It might be a good idea to work towards a serious game where the users can learn their own ethics and not be taught by parents, government or game designers.

5. Philosophical Aspects of Serious Gaming

As serious gaming is often related to games for educational means, an epistemological discussion seems logical. As mentioned earlier, constructivism plays a big role in serious gaming (Dickey, 2005). The goal is not to create a copy of a concept (or even of the whole reality) in the learner’s brain, but rather allow the learner to construct their own reality, based on experiences with (virtual) reality (Reich et al., 2009).

Another important type of serious games are simulations. Simulations are representations of reality and can be useful from a constructivist point of view to allow learners to experiment. Some might argue though, that a representation of reality is a step further away from reality and thus makes it more difficult to grasp the concepts. Especially if one adheres to the ontological ideas of Plato (such as in the Allegory of the Cave), this can be hard to accept, as the reality we sense is already a representation of a reality of ‘Forms’ or ‘Ideas’; we are making a representation of a representation. In that sense, building and using a
simulator, is comparable to digging a basement in Plato’s Cave, which is going in the wrong direction.

So, from philosophical point of view, serious games are as useful as your worldview and ideas of ontology/epistemology will allow.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, serious gaming can be used for a myriad of reasons, but mainly for teaching a user some skill or knowledge. However, it might be good to work towards serious games that allow the user to learn about ethics, morals, other cultures, teach them to be empathic etc., so the users can form their own view about the world and the society they live in.

References


