

# Games. Seriously.

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If there's anything that drives advances in computing power, it's games. Today's average graphics card packs more punch than a mainstream desktop of even a few years ago. The elegant beheading or dismembering of an opponent in *Unreal Tournament* is, for some, an actual profession, since full-time gamers are now increasingly being recognized as serious sportsmen and sportswomen.

It's interesting that most of the games in the market, on whatever platform one chooses to play them on, are violent. They may differ on the levels of blood and gore, but the basic idea is the same – the more accurately one can render the physics of an artery ripped open by an exotic weapon, the better the game will sell. There is no other explanation for the success of games such as *Quake*, *Doom*, *Unreal Tournament* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*.

It's remarkable when you think about it. Apart from scientific visualization – say the unfolding of a protein or DNA – the most advanced graphics are used in pursuit of the ever increasing realism of in-game violence. From the pixellated red splotches of early games such as *Wolfenstein 3D* to the incredible realism made possible by today's advanced graphics cards such as Ageia's PhysX, the rendition of violence is the staple of the gaming industry, a time tested recipe for the almost guaranteed success of a game.

There's increasing debate on just how much of an influence this on-screen violence has on our day-to-day lives. Are we more violent because we kill unthinkingly in games? Do violent games in regions of actual ethnic or political violence inflame tensions? At what age should children be allowed to play violent games? What are the stereotypes that are promoted by games such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*? Are those who play games less inclined towards non-violent conflict resolution in real life? What role does good parenting play in contextualizing violent games?

These aren't new questions to researchers who have been studying the impact of games on children, youth and adults for a number of years. This article however wants to point towards an emerging school of games called "Serious Games", which are being looked at by cutting-edge peacebuilding and humanitarian initiatives to bring attention to some of the world's most pressing problems such as hunger, violence and conflict.

But just what is a serious game?

Increasingly, we are seeing the emergence of games with a social conscience. One of the first was *Food Force* supported by the World Food Programme. Coupling a sophisticated 3D gaming engine to a story line that mirrors food crises in the real world, the objectives of the game were intended to strengthen a holistic understanding of issues like famine, drought and food aid.

*Food Force* is an example of a Serious Game, which Wikipedia defines as:

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“... computer and video games that are intended to not only entertain users, but have additional purposes such as education and training. They can be similar to educational games, but are primarily focused on an audience outside of primary or secondary education. Serious games can be of any genre and many of them can be considered a kind of edutainment, but the main goal of a serious game is not to entertain, though the potential of games to engage is often an important aspect of the choice to use games as a teaching tool. A serious game is usually a simulation which has the look and feel of a game, but is actually a simulation of real-world events or processes. The main goal of a serious game is usually to train or educate users, though it may have other purposes, such as marketing or advertisement, while giving them an enjoyable experience. The fact that serious games are meant to be entertaining encourages re-use.”

A recently released online Flash based game, called *Darfur is Dying*, is also an excellent example of a Serious Game - bringing to light the complexities facing Sudan and the harsh realities of life as a refugee. Whether this game is able to achieve what the larger international community has to date failed to is an open question. I'd argue however that those who are not keen followers of the situation in Darfur and aren't vocal supporters of efforts to bring about a modicum of stability in Sudan may well take to a game based depiction of the conflict and the need for peace as opposed to methods such as rallies, speeches or other treatises calling for urgent intervention. *Darfur is Dying* allows several options to make one's voice heard, including an option to email President Bush (whether he is able to comprehend such emails is a different matter).

As tools for conflict transformation go, PC games have a long way to go. But initiatives like *Dying for Darfur* show the power of even a simple Flash based game to kindle voices of support for peace that may have otherwise been left out through our traditional modes of political activism. Try it - you'd be amazed at how a simple game can transform those images on TV that we've seen, but never really understood the seriousness of.

Serious Games for peacebuilding & conflict resolution is still a really new idea. I started a while ago to think of ways the latest advanced in graphics processing technology could be harnessed to create games that are as visually compelling as the likes of *Doom III* or *Half-Life*, but with a fundamentally different premise - to teach the values of peacebuilding as opposed to mindless strafing aliens. Peace, unfortunately, is perceived to be less appealing than the visceral pleasure of blasting alien or terrorist butt. Even the Wikipedia entry above does not list a single serious game for peacebuilding.

Such games exist even today - for instance, have you heard of *A Force More Powerful*?

Featuring ten scenarios inspired by history, *A Force More Powerful* simulates nonviolent struggles to win freedom and secure human rights against dictators, occupiers, colonizers, and corrupt regimes, as well as campaigns for political and human rights for minorities and women.

Whether such games are able to successfully jostle for attention in a market dominated by violent games on the lines of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is an open question, but *A Force More Powerful* is, at least, a start. Colin Rule, who blogs at Stanford's Center for Internet and Society<sup>2</sup> on issues related to technology and one of the world's leading experts on online dispute resolution, had this to say recently on games for peacebuilding:

*Games are a powerful educational tool because they can empower players to drive learning themselves, and games can capture the interest and intellect of a player in a*

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<sup>2</sup> <http://cyberlaw.stanford.edu/blogs/rule/>

*very powerful and sustained way and submerge them in new contexts. From my perspective, it's a no-brainer that we should try to harness some of that power to teach the lessons of conflict resolution.*

There really aren't definitive answers to the questions I posed earlier in this article. Whether violent games inspire and strengthen violent behaviour in the real world or whether adults who have grown up playing violent games are receptive to peaceful alternatives to conflict are questions without a definite resolution.

What's more important at the end of the day is to use the same techniques we've used so successfully for the development and promotion of mainstream games today – gripping storylines, cutting edge graphics, engaging gameplay, celebrity endorsements and in-game appearances etc – and apply them to new generation games for peacebuilding.

Perhaps through games for peace we can teach the generations that follow us what we've been unsuccessfully trying to impart to the political leaders of today.

*This article is based on a number of blog posts featured in <http://ict4peace.wordpress.com>, a blog on ICT and Peacebuilding (ICT4Peace) maintained by the author.*