

Serious Games must look like Casual Games

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Extended Abstract

Serious Games usually have the purpose of having a positive impact on the player. Games are used as vehicles for transferring a change, usually meant to be positive. This change can of course also be essentially negative, e.g., when looking at games with radical political or racist content. The main purpose is to reach a target group by camouflaging the content that should be communicated as an entertaining game. In the past, however, this content, the “message”, has often dominated the whole game design. Fundamentals of game design have been violated, resulting in essentially boring game experiences. Also, communicating that the game serves a purpose in itself possibly causes demotivation already. Even though games necessarily require rules, they mainly offer alternative realities, parallel worlds that provide new, fairy tale like experiences. A serious purpose counteracts this notion by enforcing the game frame to be the daily reality of gamers after all. The effect is that the transfer is limited and the purpose of the game missed.

I argue that when designing serious games, the first and most important aspect is that the game works like a usual computer game. The ideal case would be that the true purpose of the game is not visible at all, if not even unknown to the gamers. This way, players are not lost during game play, and ideally continue to play the game. Teaching simple messages can and must be done by integrating them into the game mechanics. These can include fitness exercises, political or sociological messages e.g. teaching democracy or tolerance, or skills for working or emergency reactions.

The big challenge however is to teach complex information as for instance taught in school curricula. These are usually taught by letting students read long texts, and reflect on them. On the other hand, players do not want to read long texts in order to be able to play a game. Instead they want to start the game right away, and acquire the necessary skills along the way. In casual games, game tutorials are very lightweight at the start, and disguised as game introductions rather than as learning parts. During the game, gamers then get used to the acquired skills, and once they have mastered them, new skills should be offered in order to keep the game interesting and provide a flow experience.

A learning game thus must mimic this approach by only gradually introducing learning content. Texts thus must be kept to a minimum and require only a short time to read. Furthermore, they must be essential for the game, be part of the game mechanics, and provide important skills to the players in order to master the game. More detailed information may be offered, but players must be able to skip this if they are so inclined. We are currently creating a game called Internet Hero (<http://www.internet-hero.at/>), where we employ these principles in order to teach fundamentals about the Internet (how it works, services and dangers, how to behave etc.) to children in the ages 9-12. The game is available in German and English.