For a Better World:
Digital Games and the Social Change Sector

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SUMMARY: *A new breed of digital games has the potential to improve our efficacy on issues ranging from environmental sustainability to racial justice and poverty alleviation. Using current games as case studies, this paper lays the groundwork for three topics essential to understanding and growing this field: (1) a basic **needs framework** for understanding how games can serve organizations; (2) several **distinctive benefits** of games for social change; and (3) recommendations on **what should be done** to shape this sector.*

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OVERVIEW

Which sector will create and deliver games for the public good? We begin by mapping games to the existing needs of organizations, then identify the best suited methods for leveraging this media, and finally analyze several field building strategies to improve games' access and efficacy within the social change sector.   We believe that digital games do have the potential to build awareness, teach, train, mobilize, and engage people in advancing positive social change. Furthermore, we believe that there is a clear and present need for several sector-wide interventions in order to ensure that the field can continue to grow and be effective for social change.

BACKGROUND: WHY WE FOCUS ON YOUTH AND SOCIAL CHANGE ORGANIZATIONS

Our analysis in this paper focuses particularly on youth and the importance of social change organizations as partners. Contrary to popular opinion, a youth focus is not automatic: the average gamer today is 30 years old. For us, a youth focus makes sense for two reasons connected to social change: young people receive considerable attention as a current and future political constituency, and second, youth play an immediate force in shaping cultural attitudes and behaviors.

A focus on social change organizations is also worthwhile, partly because of the failure of today's schools to teach and engage youth as democratic citizens[1]. Youth civic participation over the last several decades has steadily and sizably declined[2]. Social change organizations play a critical and increasing role in fostering civic action. Unfortunately today such social change organizations must operate within a larger nonprofit sector that, despite net assets on par with the sixth-largest economy in the world[3], is thinly spread and increasingly regulated. For these reasons, we believe that a concerted effort should be made to focus on and develop social change games that can potentially buttress mission-based organizations and youth civic participation.

PART I: NEEDS FRAMEWORK - THREE CATEGORIES OF DIGITAL GAMES SOLUTIONS

Plenty has been written elsewhere about the power of games to teach traditional academic subjects and to engage young people. To add value here, we focus on the elements that are unique or distinctly important to social change.

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[1] Kahne, J. & Westheimer, J. (2003). "Teaching Democracy: What Schools Need to Do". Phi Delta Kappan. 84(1). September.
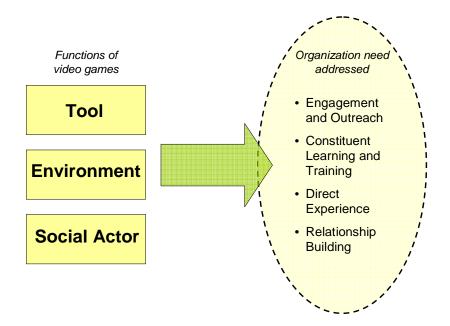[2] Galston, W.A. (201). "Political knowledge, political engagement, and civic education." *American Political Science Review*, 4, 217-34
[3] National Council of Nonprofit Associations (February, 2006), "United States Nonprofit Sector" which addresses the year 2003, can be retrieved as of April 28, 2006 at:
http://www.ncna.org/_uploads/documents/live//us_sector_report_2003.pdf

Intersecting with Organizational Needs

The core question seems simple: "What do digital games have to do with social change?" Yet too often, the question is answered in a one-dimensional manner – independent of whether the game is intended for large-scale outreach or deep perspective-changing education. Games have an incredible variety of gameplay types and distribution channels. Any attempt to explain the relevance of games begins with understanding the breadth of game solutions alongside the organizational needs they can address.

We have broken down the spectrum of solutions along three functional axes for social change organizations: (a) games as practical tools for civic outreach, (b) games as environments for civic learning, and (c) games as social actors in forming civic identities[4].

Functions of video games

Tool

Environment

Social Actor

Organization need addressed

- Engagement and Outreach
- Constituent Learning and Training
- Direct Experience
- Relationship Building

As tools, games increase capabilities for civic engagement and outreach. Specific applications can include fundraising, mobilizing constituencies, and raising awareness.

Take for example, the United Nations World Food Program's (WFP) sponsorship of the game *Food Force*. The video game educates players about hunger crises through a fictitious island called Sheylan. Six "missions" provide an overview of how food aid is used in both emergencies and long-term development projects. Players must navigate successive challenges, from initial crisis assessment to delivery and distribution of food aid. Within the first year of its launch in

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[4] Based on Fogg's functional roles for persuasive technologies. Fogg, B.J., Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do, 2003, Morgan Kaufmann, San Francisco

2004, the 30-minute game was downloaded more than 2 million times.[5]   Moreover, unlike most documentary videos or public service announcements, games such as Food Force can more easily and smoothly integrate with immediate online "take action" opportunities.   The Food Force site links directly to opportunities to donate, help spread the word, and sign up to stay informed about future news on hunger.

As an environment, digital games provide direct experience and immersive learning that is rare in traditional media. In the process, games can facilitate constituent training and organizing.

In 2006, the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC) released the game *A Force More Powerful*. The game simulates nonviolent struggles to win freedom and secure human rights against dictators and other oppressors. Modeling the real-world choices of student organizers, the game allows players to devise strategies, apply tactics and see the results in ten scenarios -- thus learning how to use tactics from boycotts to membership recruiting.[6]   The deeply flexible system forces players to integrate diverse disciplines from strategic planning to management at a series of decision points. Each decision is an opportunity for reflection and is almost immediately followed with feedback.

A Force More Powerful may inspire other causes to consider a similar approach. Imagine a game created by an environmental organization where players seek to prevent global meltdown by manipulating various conservation alternatives; for the politically-minded, each election cycle already spawns a fresh batch of games allowing players to try their hand at running a campaign[7].

As social actors, games can create relationships with feedback and behavior modeling. Beyond their role as a platform, digital games can themselves socially situate action and identity. This may be particularly attractive to nonprofits with already-established programs in e-mentoring and networked learning.

Girls Inc, a nonprofit with educational programs that help girls confront subtle societal messages about their potential and prepares them for success, has used a game in this manner to support its mission.   In 2004, the organization launched *TeamUP*[8] for girls as a game that actively counters several traditional stereotypes of girls."[9] While jumping, sliding and throwing objects to solve puzzles as characters in a team, the players are modeling the nonprofit's message: for girls

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[5] The game can be found at www.food-force.com
[6] http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org/game/index.php
[7] Consider, for example, The Howard Dean for Iowa Game.
[8] The game can be found at http://www.girlsinc.org/teamup
[9] An article featuring representatives from the developers and the nonprofit is available as of April 27, 2006 at: http://largeanimal.com/news/?id=18.

to be bold, smart, and strong. Yet the modeling is much more participatory than watching a video or reading a book. The more appropriately reactive the game, the more the player can assume the role of apprentice to a modeled mentor. Of course, such mentoring is best accompanied with the perspective of face-to-face contact. Yet such games may significantly extend the feedback and behavior modeling reach of organizations like Girls Inc.

For each of the three categories outlined above, examples of social change games are quickly growing. Understanding the scope of digital games as civic tools, environments, and social actors is essential for organizations to efficiently use the medium to advance their issues.

PART II: DISTINCTIVE BENEFITS – HOW DIGITAL GAMES DIFFER FROM TRADITIONAL STRATEGIES

Several characteristics of digital games make them uniquely strong tools for empowering an organization's constituency:

Distinctive Benefit: Low risk adoption of a different world view

Over the past several decades, social and cognitive sciences have found that broad constituencies will ignore and even act contrary to clear facts and evidence if they can't reconcile them with their underlying frame for how the world works[10]. Cognitive linguists like George Lakoff have described how public discourse on social issues is triggered first and foremost by these largely unconscious frames. What is powerful is that games also have an implicit logic of how the world works built into their interactive systems; to succeed, players must master these systems.

Games thus offer significant potential as models for introducing players to new or partly-formed worldviews. Moreover, the low cost of failure (restarting a game is straightforward; coping with exile from a peer group is not) means that players will be emotionally capable of trying out competing ideologies. Such an experience with successive worldviews is nearly impossible with traditional media. While the research is still emerging, games are demonstrating extraordinary promise both to deeply teach how the world works, and to help look beyond entrenched perspectives.

When the target constituency is youth, empowerment approaches emphasizing identity are particularly important. Between the ages of 15 and 22 is the critical time when young people are developing the 'civic identities' they will take with them into adult life[11]. Games offer the ability to "try on"

[10] "U.S. in the World: Talking Global Issues with Americans – A Practical Guide", 2005, co-published by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and The Aspen Institute; more information is available at http://www.usintheworld.org
[11] Delli Carpini, M. "The Youth Engagement Initiative: Strategy Paper", retrieved April 27, 2006 from http://www.pewtrusts.com/misc_html/pp_youth_strategy_paper.cfm

different identities, and even customize them, with little risk of failure. More importantly, games offer the ability to earn your identity. More than with a book or movie, after playing a videogame, the player perceives their actions as significantly responsible for the success of the game hero and can claim pride in the narrative's ultimate success.[12]

Distinctive Benefit: Experiential learning tied to real-time service

Offline there is already significant momentum, theory, and research[13] behind the service learning tradition in building civic identities. The tradition's established emphasis on personally-meaningful experiential learning is a good fit with games, especially as the evolution of digital worlds makes it increasingly possible to perform genuine service online.

For resource-strapped social change organizations, the online setting may help align service learning with the high daily demands of providing the service itself. Digital games can help leverage the enormous voluntary labor pool that characterizes many social change organizations. Consider tactics like door-to-door canvassing: the effective practices are well documented, but novices -- who are often in the majority -- lack both the core civic skills and the confidence for independent learning. In such operational realms, games' particular advantage lies in their scalable experiential learning delivery. The potential for using open source to build capacity for thousands of grassroots organizations magnifies the benefit of investigating such options.

Key Considerations for Social Change Organizations

Although it is tempting to create a game when inspiration first strikes, success with a game necessitates broader planning than most traditional media development.   Good games take unusually interdisciplinary expertise, up-front distribution strategies, and significant resources. Some key considerations include:

- Are your constituents already comfortable with digital media, especially games media?
- What concrete organizational need will the game fill? Will it really do it better that the alternatives?
- How is your digital game strategy different from your existing programs and media outreach strategies?
- Who has the expertise to make and distribute the game? (Expertise in one domain is no guarantee in the second, but the two should be coordinated from the onset)

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[12] Gee, JP (2003) *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy,* Palgrave Macmillan, New York, USA

[13] Common principles of successful civic education through service learning have been observed in, for example, Kahne, J. & Westheimer, J. (2003). "Teaching Democracy: What Schools Need to Do". Phi Delta Kappan. 84(1). September.

Take for example <u>"The Organizing Game"</u>. Several organizations concerned about empowering communities of color teamed together to develop a game. Their vision was to significantly scale their civic training program while retaining the social interaction techniques required in community organizing. Recognizing the difficulty of genuine game design, a private company was hired to design and develop the game. The nonprofit provided both the content expertise and a built-in user base for testing and distribution. Ultimately, the game allowed the social change groups to introduce key grassroots organizing concepts while providing an opportunity for their constituency to practice skills in a non-threatening, entertaining environment. Freely available courtesy of foundation funding, the game's open source underpinnings ensure it can be repurposed for other social issues at a fraction of the initial development cost.[14]

The sector-wide implications of a shift towards game media are still being understood. Of course, the choice of media technology both affects what is communicated and serves as a metaphor for understanding the content, as Neil Postman has observed.[15] With the advent of TV, the television commercial became the fundamental metaphor for political discourse and the meaning of 'political knowledge' shifted from words in one's head to pictures.[16] Today games are increasingly mainstream, and they are driving a shift in what civic education means. The magnitude and nature of this shift is uncertain, and deserves further study.

PART III: INTERVENTIONS TO SHAPE THIS EMERGING SECTOR: WHY NOW?

To maximize opportunities for social change, timely intervention is needed. In part, this is because nonprofits tend to be late adopters of technology, but more pressingly, the media domain is increasingly solidifying and consolidating. For a policy example, consider that expanding persuasion tactics in the advergames sector will likely come under increasing scrutiny by policymakers in the near term. Any resulting policy shift will likely affect nonprofits' use of games for civic outreach. Across the field, late interventions to shape the domain may leave social change organizations forced to obey rules and economies of others' design.

We propose three strategies to catalyze the sector's readiness:

STRATEGY #1: SUPPORT A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Educational games are inherently interdisciplinary and a predictable barrier lies in the awkwardness of collaboration between the silos of industry, academy and nonprofit. It's hard enough to

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[14] The game can be found at http://organizinggame.org

[15] Postman: "our media are our metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture; and p.157: "a technology comes equipped with a program for social change" N. (1985), *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Penguin, New York, New York

[16] Postman, same book, pages 126 and 130

make a fun game, let alone one that integrates with an existing social change program. Communities of practice have shown success at sharing and growing practical knowledge[17] and have begun to emerge around both "serious games" and games for social change. Improving access to such communities for low-budget organizations and disadvantaged groups should be an ongoing priority. For youth media programs, community internships with professionals can be invaluable.

A set of guidelines for ethical persuasion in games would be helpful. With such a young sector, accusations of indoctrination could have broad reactionary consequences. It is true that games may represent the purest technological opportunity for operant conditioning, a red flag for inappropriate persuasion, where reinforcement or punishment is used to promote specific behaviors[18]. Yet for the vast majority, pressure from funders and peers already pushes social change organizations to adopt responsible modes of persuasion, essential for participatory democracy and ethical leadership[19].

STRATEGY #2: BUILD CHANNELS FOR DISTRIBUTION & FUNDING

In the long term, the threat of online invisibility grows with increasing consolidation of traditional media giants[20] and the "winner take all" effect of Internet search engines. The consequences may be hidden at first while the media's current hunger for "positive" games provides free press that inflates distribution numbers.

To the surprise of many in the commercial games sector, social change organizations introduce distinctive distribution channels to the games sector. For example, advocacy organizations maintain communication lines to thousands of individuals dedicated to their cause, and each connection in turn has a family and network of friends, representing incredible social capital for both distribution and fundraising.

Second, nonprofits can achieve impressive distribution by undercutting the corporate competition. Corporate funding modes must choose price points to recoup investment plus profit – whereas mission-based organizations can subsidize, using investors who will accept the social outcome as their return.[21] This nonprofit opportunity is often overlooked in business plans, where vague distribution strategies prevail. Encouraging explicit recognition of this relative distribution advantage will help nonprofits secure respect from their purely commercial colleagues and funding more generally.

A final strategy lies in maximizing economies of scale that could also substantially improve distribution for a number of social change games. By aggregating according to social issue, learning style or target audience, coherent channels could provide clean packages for wider use; partnering with

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[17] Wenger, E., McDermott, R. and Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA

[18] Fogg, p51

[19] Based on Fogg's examples of how persuasion is relied upon for good, p.212

[20] Montgomery, K., Gottlieb-Robles, B., and Larson, G., (3/2004) *Youth as E-Citizens: Engaging the Digital Generation*. Center for Social Media, School of Communication, American University. p116. Also available online at http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/ecitizens/youthreport.pdf

[21] For examples of success stories, see the millions of copies distributed by offering high production value at no cost in the case of both America's Army (http://www.americasarmy.com/) and the UN's Food Force (http://www.food-force.com/).

mainstream media organizations or film festivals would further increase visibility. Another mainstream approach is the creation of a Corporation for Public Gaming (CPG)[22] to operate on a model similar to its CPB broadcasting equivalent, providing grants to develop and distribute games.

STRATEGY #3: ENCOURAGE EFFICACY IN GAMES

Again because of the breadth of possible game solutions, effective social change with games depends upon good strategic planning. Especially in a new terrain where established models are scarce, design proposals should include an articulation of the game program's "theory of change"[23]. This can also inform evaluation strategies, which are often tied to intermediate outcomes when the social change goal is difficult to measure.

Finally, evaluation studies are critical learning tools for improving efficacy. Given the form's short history in tackling social change, it would be extremely helpful to conduct evaluations of organizations using games, especially when considered alongside several other comparable forms of media. To ultimately affect the spectrum of social issues, we must begin to measure and improve transference from game-world learning to real-world perspectives and behaviors.[24] Insights uncovered should be translated into expectations for games literacy and criteria for rating and funding current and proposed games.[25]

IN CONCLUSION

Games and the domain of positive social change will evolve together. This paper seeks to contribute in two regards: for future games projects, a better articulation of their power will spur wise investments; for the sector, understanding appropriate interventions will improve access and distribution for the public good.

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[22] See David Rejeski's summary proposal: GamaSutra, April 11, 2006:
http://seriousgamessource.com/features/feature_041106_public_gaming.html
[23] Theories of Change typically include specifying interventions, a pathway to change and prominent assumptions. Several high quality websites offer guides for writing Theories of Change; see, for example, ActKnowledge and the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change at http://www.theoryofchange.org/
[24] Consider as a model the Evaluation Learning Group which has a focus on international "public will" campaigns and is collaboratively run by the Global Interdependence Initiative of the Aspen Institute and the Communications Consortium Media Center. More information is available at: http://www.gii-exchange.org/web/about.php
[25] Several contest models are currently being tested, organized around themes such as public diplomacy (at the USC Center on Public Diplomacy) and raising awareness about the genocide in Darfur (mtvU).