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# Serious games taken seriously

CHRISTIAN SWERTZ

Freedom. That's probably one of the most important terms while playing games. No boss, no commitments, no deadlines, and really nothing real to lose: Game over? Insert a new coin! Of course, in games there are tasks, there are team leaders, and there are countdowns chasing you. But that's part of the game, and there's no business collapsing, no bridge braking down and nobody hurt if you need an extra try for that level. If something went wrong, you can just play it again. And as we know, the possibly infinite repetitions and the lack of an outer objective are key criteria for play (Fink 1960; Huizinga 1956).

But life isn't all beer and skittles. You have to graduate, to do your job, and to pass your tests at school - lots of serious things where you can't choose what you do and where you can't try again and again and again until you make it. There's only one life, and there isn't much discussion about how it will end. In this concern, there's hardly any freedom but a lot of force.

And now there are digital games and learning, acting as serious games. Serious games promise freedom and force at once, don't they? Sounds like a vintage contradiction in the first place, a pretty good dilemma, or maybe just mucking around with the player, since selling hard work as fun and having people pay for it must be the robber baron's dream. And then it's a trap you don't want anybody to stumble in, unless we are witnessing a dialectical miracle - the final synthesis of force and freedom.

A little step back to look behind the scene might shed some light on the issue here. The idea of combining games and learning is not exactly new. In the 18. century games were applied for educational purposes by Basedow (Parmentier 2004). He was picking up earlier ideas like the negative education by Rousseau (1972). Looking behind this concept shows that learning objectives were not explicitly taught but expressed in the rules of the games. The objectives are learned in the game by discovering the rules - and rules of games are forces, particularly if the toy is a computer, since computers can't negotiate rules. But the player still experiences the game as play and thus the freedom in the game, even if it is forced, by rules. So playing games in general, and serious games in particular, is a kind of a dialectical miracle. But that's the miracle that accomplishes all learning: On the one hand, the learner is forced to learn something, and thus forced by that something. On the other hand, learners are free to understand what and however they want to. The learner is free to play within and with the force of teachers rules (Litt 1952).

If the teacher is setting up the rules of the serious game, it's the game designer who acts as a teacher. As a teacher, they becomes responsible for the teaching. This responsibility includes taking care for the learner, choosing appropriate methods, and selecting content that support the learner in becoming well educated. Considering the game designer as a teacher who is responsible for the content, it is quite

alarming how often serious games are mentioned in the context of military research. Remember the atomic bomb? Technology, once unleashed, tends to run out of control. And video games are not always designed or used for good. They might be used in a vicious way. Actually, you can use video games to prepare people to act as killers - and this has nothing to do with a violent content. It's the context serious games are developed and used in, that has to be taken into account here. To comply with their educational responsibility, game designers have to consider that there are other interests in society such as peace and happiness. Since serious games are developed to teach seriously, thinking about ethical aspects and conducting a critical reflection of embedded values is a serious issue for serious game developers - like for every other teacher as well.

As you might have guessed, serious games are the main topic of this Eludamos issue. We are proud to present selected papers on digital games and learning from the Vienna Games Conference 2009. The conference was dedicated to the "Future and Reality of Gaming (F.R.O.G.)", and most of the speakers were engaged in the future of games as media for learning. The papers selected for this Eludamos issue cover a wide range of different perspectives. The educational perspective taken in this editorial is a starting point for the contribution by Mitgutsch. He suggests a theory of game based learning based on the concept of passion. This concept might be used as a background for curriculum issues as discussed by Klimmt, or for the analysis of video games in biographies, which is researched by Meister with a qualitative approach. Reading these excellent papers, suggests possibilities for connecting theoretical and empirical considerations into a curriculum that considers responsibility for the society by focusing the player as a person becomes apparent as a challenge. Maybe that is a mission for the next F.R.O.G., that takes place from 25.9.-27.9.2009 in Vienna (see <http://bupp.at/frog> for upcoming informations). See you there!

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