

Chapter 45

Games for Social Change: Review of the Potential for Multi Player Online Gaming to Facilitate the Emergence and Growth of Progressive Movements for Social Change Within Youth and Community Work

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ABSTRACT

Building on the use of the internet and social media as sites for activism, this paper highlights the emergence of political activism and collective protest in the online gaming environment. Referencing social movement theory and the rapidly evolving capacity of multiplayer online games to facilitate the development of strong group identities and real-time, real-world collaboration, the paper explores the potential of such games to create a space and a mechanism for enabling the emergence of movements for social change. Highlighting the growing number of social activist games designers, building values of equality and social justice into their gameplay, the paper draws an epistemological link between the work of these “conscientious designers” and the process of Conscientization within youth and community work inspired by the critical analysis of political activists such as Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal.

INTRODUCTION

The rationale informing this review has emerged from the author’s background as a Community Development academic and practitioner committed to addressing social exclusion among marginalised groups. The author has a particular interest in creative approaches to youth engagement and has concerns about the limited and contracting public space for critical discourse and mobilisation around issues of social justice. In this context the potential of multiplayer online gaming to provide such a space is worth exploring.

The objective of this review is to explore the extent to which there exists an ontological and epistemological overlap between those researching and developing digital games and those researching and engaged in critical social change through community development. The proposition informing this paper

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is that should such shared values and vision exist to a significant extent across these two fields, there is the potential to build collaboration harnessing the power of games to the principals of community development. Such a collaboration could open up a new medium for undertaking community work and a new arena in which games can play a direct and considered role in driving positive social change.

The paper opens with a critique of the declining space for critical public discourse in the face of increased managerialism within the community and voluntary sector and posits that the internet provides an effective mechanics to facilitate such discourse and that Multiplayer online Games may provide a New Public Space in which progressive movements for social change can emerge. In order to assess the potential of digital games to facilitate the emergence and growth of such movements this paper goes on to present an overview of The Scale and the Scope of Online Gaming in terms of technical capabilities, applications and the structure of the digital gaming sector. This juxtaposition between the gradual decline in realworld spaces and the rapid growth in virtual spaces for interaction and discourse, especially among people, provides the social context informing this review.

The next issue to be explored is the nature of the space for critical discourse in the digital gaming sector and the lessons which can be learned from social activism within other media. The paper highlights the emergence of critical, or social impact gaming in response to the perceived and real hegemony and misogamy inherent in many Digital Games. Having presented Games for Social Change, as a movement within contemporary games development, informed by progressive social values, the paper examines the evolution, impact and limitations of Cyber Activism in the more conventional environments of blogs, websites and social media. This is important in mapping the potential of multiplayer online computer games, as it highlights the factors influencing the impact of those media and acknowledges the existence of two opposing camps with regard to the potential of electronic activism as a means of advocating for social change. The principal criticisms being levelled at cyber activism, highlight the superfluous nature of much of the engagement with critical issues and the limited meaningful interaction that such media facilitates between activists.

Research reviewed on social movement theory acknowledges the importance of shared values, identities, collective action, and sustained engagement in the emergence of movements for social change, characteristics which, as outlined, are underdeveloped in many digital media used by activists. The research reviewed would suggest that if gaming is to build on the achievements of conventional cyber activism then its capacity to generate Games-based Identity, Community and Solidarity may prove its greatest asset. This capacity for interaction inherent in multiplayer online games, coupled with the ability to design games informed by themes of social justice, establishes a clear potential for the use of this medium by social activists. Indeed simulation and role play games have been used for many years in community development as a method of undertaking critical social education, This ideological link between the epistemologies informing progressive gaming with those in critical community work provides the common ground upon which collaborations may be built.

While the main focus of this review has been the establishment of common ideological ground between progressive games designers and community activists in order to highlight the potential of multiplayer online games as a space for critical social discourse and the emergence of social movements, perhaps the most important characteristics of critical social education is that it encourages people to act to confront the causes of oppression. This presents the challenge addressed in the closing section of this review, that is ensuring that Real World Outcomes emerge from using 'virtual world' media. While the literature would indicate mixed results in this regard it does indicate that there are mechanics which can be designed into games in order to maximise the potential for action.

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