

Chapter LXXV

The Positive Impact Model in Commercial Games

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ABSTRACT

What is the future of video games? Is it more realism? More violence? Better physics? Artificially intelligent characters? More social networking games? Free to play and advertising supported? Games for non-gamers? More controversy, political scapegoating, and legal challenges? It's probably all of the above, and more. In fact, while we may expect to see more of the same from the commercial video game industry, there is always the potential for surprises, both pleasant and not-so pleasant. One area of the future of games is less often discussed, but represents one of the most powerful and positive directions the industry could take. I call it the "positive impact model," and for the rest of this chapter, I will attempt to provide some insight into what that phrase is meant to convey.

PREAMBLE

I've been a video game player for nearly 40 years. As I've matured, so have video games—both as an industry and as a technology. And with maturity and years of game analysis and design, I've come to alter my perceptions of what video games actually mean in my life, and more importantly, what they could accomplish in the lives of gamers all over the world. So, even though I'm

not an educator or a university professor... even though I have no desire to design or even play *educational* games, I do want to design and play games that educate, and that inspire and model and even simulate some aspect of what we like to call "life." Looking at it another way, I want to learn, grow, challenge and deepen my self-knowledge and expand through video games. And I want to have a ton of fun doing it, as part of a varied and balanced life. If I want that experience for myself,

I also want it for the millions of game players all over the world. If I were looking for a mission in life, one of the options on my list would be to develop and proselytize the idea that video games can be simultaneously fun, financially successful and *intentionally* beneficial to players and to society.

So what sets me apart from many people today who are working to combine learning and game technologies? I think it's the angle—the angle from which people approach the situation. For instance, who knows what inspired Will Wright to create SimCity or The Sims? In neither case was the inspiration about a game, but rather an exploration of an idea from outside the game industry.

So my premise is that mainstream, extremely commercially viable video games can also include elements that benefit players—by conscious design. I say “conscious design” because people are beginning to put forward some well-conceived arguments that video games already have many intrinsic benefits, ranging from eye-hand coordination to stress relief to improvements in critical thinking and problem solving. However, nobody today is saying that the current crop of video games, overall, represents an obvious or intentional positive force in the world. In fact, most people focus on the negative aspects of commercial video games and more or less ignore most of their positive contributions.

But is it enough to say, simply, I have a subject or idea I want people to learn or understand, and I'm going to make a video game to teach it? I think it depends on how much you understand games, game players, and game structures. I'll take it as a given that you understand your subject matter.

Where Will Wright may have been inspired by architecture and books like *A Pattern Language*, he did not create games about architecture specifically, nor did he attempt to turn *A Pattern Language* into a game. Instead, he used his inspirations to fuel an inquiry that ultimately led to hugely successful games like SimCity and The

Sims. Where Sid Meier had an interest in history and the advancement of technology, he did not just create a pedantic teaching tool that looked like a game, but was a textbook in disguise. He created Civilization, a game that's so much fun to play, nobody complains that they might also be learning something.

Now, to be fair, none of Will Wright's games, or Sid's for that matter, replace real education on a subject. They are not intended to do that. They are intended to be fun to play, and ultimately to make money. So why are they important?

I think the idea is that each tool has its purpose, and video games can be adjuncts to learning, just as audio tapes can be adjuncts to learning a language, but can't make you fluent without other practice, such as actually speaking the language in real conversations. But we're talking about subject matter here, and it largely depends on what the subject is—how deep and involved. Video games are fine for training, such as the Cold Stone Creamery training game that teaches its employees how to make and serve their ice cream treats, or any number of corporate games designed to provide procedures practice.

Video games can do more than teach specific subject matter or act as training aids. I believe they can help people learn to think more effectively, to gain emotional connection with situations and subjects, to explore their emotions and even to experience a part of history or what it feels like to make a great discovery that changes the world. Through simulations, they can understand something about science or technology or what it's like to drive a car around a track at 500 miles per hour or fly a Spitfire in a dogfight to protect Mother England during the Battle of Britain, or even what it might be like to live in a politically perilous society where any mistake can mean death.

Much of what I suggest in this chapter probably sounds idealistic and impractical. After all, out of the thousands of video games, there have been only a handful that really came close to the mark

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