

Chapter 18

Games, Ethics and Engagement: Potential Consequences of Civic- Minded Game Design and Gameplay

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines ethical ambiguities confronted by the design and play of serious games focused on civic engagement. Our findings derive from our examination of two educational simulation games that focus on contemporary issues related to social and political conflict. We believe game simulations are complex in nature and offer particularly rich environments for cognitive learning. Within the following chapter we examine the relationship between games and learning, specific approaches to game design, and the ability of games to encourage civic engagement. While we found that game participants gained knowledge of curricular content and practiced democratic skills during their experiences with the online simulations, there also occurred unintended consequences. In turn, we believe it is critical to analyze deeper ethical ambiguities related to the consequences of civic-minded game design and gameplay and support research efforts to further recognize and expand upon the development and research of serious games involving civic-minded educational online simulations.

INTRODUCTION

Within the following chapter we use two simulation games to focus on better understanding ethical ambiguities that arise from the design and play of games whose themes and content relate to contemporary social and political conflict. Building upon Shaffer, Squire, Halverson and

Gee's (2005) argument that games are "...most powerful when they are personally meaningful, experiential, social, and epistemological all at the same time" (Shaffer, Squire, Halverson & Gee, 2005, p. 3), we believe a specific subset of games—simulations—offer particularly rich and textured opportunities to explore the ethical ambiguities of design and play. As game designers and researchers, we borrow our definitions of simulations from Aldrich (2006, 2004), de Freitas (2006), and Frasca

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(2003), noting that participants in these types of games adopt and interact through defined roles, often work collaboratively, solve problems based upon real-world dilemmas, and are immersed in virtual and in-person experiences with outcomes not easily categorized by wins and losses. Having created and studied games and simulations, we believe that when the dynamics of design and play intersect, the opportunities for learning are as rich as the possible ethical conflicts are complex. As a result, we argue that the importance of games to learning is deepened when the ethical ambiguities associated with design and play are studied and better theorized. In particular, it is our hope that the present research contributes to a growing discussion about the importance of learning, games, and ethics as applied to serious games involving civic-minded simulations.

In this chapter, we first examine and substantiate our position on the type of game ‘play’ found within our case studies. In doing so we delve into the role of serious games and the triad that exists between ludology, narratology, and affect. Examination of this triad sets up analysis of our work further by first pulling apart the importance of the third component of the triad, that of affect. In turn, we examine important aspects of affect related to game design and gameplay to further substantiate our research work on civic-minded game design and gameplay. These include; (1) the relationship between games and learning, (2) specific approaches to game design, and (3) the ability of games to encourage civic engagement. Following these sections, our research describes and analyzes two case studies involving educational online simulations that focus learning on civic engagement through participants’ exposure to simulations that place individuals in ethically challenging contexts. These case studies are *The Arab Israeli Conflict* (AIC) and *First Wind* (FW).

Findings from these two case studies are then presented in the form of intended and unintended consequences that affect both game designers and players. Following summation of our findings, we

offer important avenues for scholars to consider in terms of potential future research involving serious games and the inclusion of civic content and action. Finally we provide concluding remarks in the form of ethical concerns that we believe should be considered by game designers, players, and individuals who use serious games for learning purposes.

Defining Gameplay

Once thought of as simply opportunities for “play,” games have proven to be far more complex than initially given credit. As Malaby (2007) points out, it is often our misinterpretation about the power of games that impedes our greater understanding of these resources. One salient entrance into our examination of ethical ambiguities and game simulations begins with Frasca (2003) and her discussion of ludology, the formal discipline of game studies. While primarily concerned with introducing ludology within contexts of game authorship and narrative, Frasca differentiates between the design of games and the design of simulations as experiences for “experimentation where user action is not only allowed but also required” (Frasca, 2003, p. 229). Building upon a discussion of ludology, Simkins and Steinkuehler further posit that working in combination, “... the triad of ludology, narratology, and affect can help us understand how story, play, and feeling intertwine to create effective gameplay” (Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008, p. 19).

As we move to examine the second aspect of the triad, we see that narratology within the role of game design and gameplay is described by the differences between “narrauthors” and “simauthors” (Frasca, 2003). Within contextual settings where “winning” a game is seen as a primary objective, and threat of loss is a motivation for rigidly defined success, games are designed by narrauthors who base their narratives upon fixed sequences of cause and effect events. Alternatively, games that allow for different degrees of fate, or

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