

# games:

## IMPROVING SOCIAL ISSUES



entertainment  
software  
association



Nonprofit organizations and issue advocates now view video games as an effective medium for communicating ideas and generating support among young tech-savvy consumers. Computer and video games have become successful vehicles to teach important values, engage a new generation of voters and bring the problems facing other countries to the front door of new audiences. Able to unite and inspire, social issue games bring a holistic element to the entertainment software industry and provide public education campaigns with a 21<sup>st</sup> century way to spread their messages.



### GLOBALIZATION

Traveling to other countries, especially those stricken with poverty and war, can make a powerful impact that affects a person long after they have returned home. However, many people, especially children and young adults, do not have that opportunity. As a result, organizations have developed video games that provide a window into these worlds with the goal of revealing to new audiences the hardships and perseverance of other cultures.

To reach young Americans and raise awareness of difficult issues such as hunger, disease and war, groups are turning to the popular medium of video games. University of Southern California students created *Darfur is Dying* to raise awareness about genocide in Sudan. High school students participating in a Global Kids of New York after-school project created *Ayiti: The Cost of Life*, a video game that focuses on poverty in Haiti.

*Food Force*, created by the United Nations World Food Programme is another example. Designed by U.N. officials to educate children about world hunger, players become humanitarian workers stationed on a fictional famine-stricken island. One year after its launch, the game had more than four million players worldwide. It was so popular that Suzanne Seggerman, president and co-founder of Games for Change, participated in the Daesung Global Contents Forum to persuade entertainment software firms to make more games like *Food Force*.

Impact Games' *Peacemaker* allows players to act as the Israeli prime minister or Palestinian president in simulated negotiations between the two nations. Inspired by the real events of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the game challenges players to assume leader positions and bring peace to their territories before their term in office ends. Players choose from three difficulty levels: calm, tense or violent, and face the consequences of their actions through opinion polls and indicators that signal progress towards peace.

Programmers are also working to bring video games to poverty-stricken countries around the world. Playpower is a project initiated by the Playpower Foundation, which fosters collaborations between game designers, cognitive scientists and non-governmental organizations to bring educational video games to developing nations where access to modern classrooms and textbooks is inconsistent. The organization targets a \$10 platform that makes learning games affordable for the 4.1 billion people worldwide who earn less than \$3,000 per year. In addition, Playpower conducts field trials with the help of volunteer researchers to confirm that the games work and produce measurable results.



## ISSUE ADVOCACY

Video games educate young people on a variety of issues including Internet safety, bullying, encouraging healthy lifestyles and current events. For these efforts, the games adopt the "moral of the story" approach that popular television programs have used for decades. By teaching a lesson through an entertaining avenue, these video games help tackle the social issues facing many of today's adolescents.

Web Wise Kids is a unique organization that teaches kids about essential safety and privacy issues - such as social networking, blogging, online romances, cyber stalking, and identity theft - through video games based on actual criminal cases. Web Wise Kids' game *Missing* recruits players to rescue a boy who mistakenly agreed to meet a predator after he misrepresented himself in an online chat room. The organization also created three other games, *Mirror Image*, *AirDogs*, and *It's Your Call*. In *Mirror Image*, players work with a detective to catch a criminal who stalked two girls after promising modeling contracts. *AirDogs* teaches players the repercussions of illegally downloading software and explains the lifelong legal and social consequences that can result from online crimes. The organization designed its newest online game, *It's Your Call*, to teach school children how to use cell phones and the Internet responsibly.

Nonprofits and human rights advocates also understand the power of social game play as an interactive resource to raise awareness of key issues. Breakthrough, a New York-based human rights organization, is one nonprofit that continually uses games to inspire change. In April 2011, Breakthrough launched *America 2049*, a 12-week-long Facebook-based game that combined elements of social game play, digital media and real-life events to educate players on global issues including discrimination based on race and sexual orientation, immigration, labor and religious freedom. Players followed an online curriculum, which featured a different social justice theme each week, and collaborated with other players to devise solutions to the social issues facing a futuristic, dystopian society.

## 20 years

The jail sentence given to an online predator, identified by a 15-year old girl named Katie who realized after playing *Missing* that a man she met online could be dangerous. Katie is now an Ambassador to Youth for Web Wise Kids and shares her story with parents and teens to educate youth on Internet safety.

## More than 20 million

The number of people that played *America 2049* during its 12-week-long run.

Other games address issues of school violence and bullying. *Cool School: Where Peace Rules* is a computer game developed by a team of human development scientists, teachers and government mediators that teaches elementary school students how to resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner. Inanimate objects – such as pencils, schoolbooks and baseballs – come to life in the game, and act out 52 different scenarios depicting common conflicts. Players must decide how to handle each argument and receive rewards for choosing positive solutions to resolve conflicts with letters they collect to win.

*Breakaway*, a game developed by students from the Emergent Media Center at Champlain College in Vermont with support of the United Nations Population Fund and the Popular Media Center, educates young boys about violence, gender issues and racial stereotypes. The online game alternates between game play and narrative story lines and challenges players to make tough decisions about social issues, which impact future player success. Part of the UN Secretary General's UNiTE to End Violence Against Women campaign, the game has attracted users from 95 countries including Ghana, Mali, Tunisia, Indonesia and Azerbaijan, and continues to educate young boys on making positive and impactful choices.

National nonprofit organization The Century Council offers a series of active and online games through its "Ask, Listen, Learn: Kids and Alcohol Don't Mix" initiative that teach middle school students about the dangers of underage drinking. Games such as *EcoChallenge*, *Bully Dodger*, and *Flight Archery* challenge players to answer questions about how alcohol affects their body and the impact of making healthy decisions. The initiative's website also features lesson guides for teachers, game evaluation handouts, and additional information for parents.

Media outlets and social organizations also turn to games to transform news and real-life events into interactive experiences. For instance, the game *Hurricane Katrina: Tempest in Crescent City*, created by a team of youth leaders within Global Kids' Playing 4 Keeps program in partnership with Gamepill Inc., educates players about the problems following the natural disaster in New Orleans. In addition, Newgrounds' game *Super Mario BP Oil Spill* recreates the devastating 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in a Mario-themed world and challenges players to save fish and plug spewing pipelines.

Further, some games allow players themselves to give back. One example is *The Extraordinaries*, a Web game and mobile app created by an organization of the same name that enables players to engage in "microvolunteer missions," such as locating the nearest defibrillator in a particular area. When a player completes the mission, it benefits a real organization – in this case, the First Aid Corps.

**2,500**

The number of nonprofit organizations that have received aid from more than 40,000 micro-volunteers who completed tasks on their computers and mobile devices through the game platform created by The Extraordinaries.



## POLITICS

Organizations and individuals utilize entertainment software for political purposes, either by creating games that highlight a divisive political topic or by harnessing a successful game to bring increased attention to a political cause.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, video games garnered the most attention ever in a U.S. federal election. Then-Senator Barack Obama became the first candidate to advertise within a video game, purchasing virtual billboards in the games *Burnout Paradise* and *Madden '09*. Senator John McCain's campaign website featured *Pork Invaders*, an original flash game parodying the classic arcade game *Space Invaders*.

Developers also incorporate political issues into games to engage the public in key policy debates taking place on Capitol Hill and around the country. In July 2011, American Public Media, in cooperation with the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, released *Budget Hero 2.0*. The game brings our country's budget debate to players' computer screens, and challenges them to make difficult decisions about how best to balance the nation's complex budget.

Other games encourage understanding of and participation in our political process. Middle school and ninth-grade teachers use iCivics to help teach civics lessons. Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor collaborated with Georgetown University Law School and Arizona State University to develop the online, game-based learning platform. First launched in 2009, iCivics now features five games about constitutional law and the branches of U.S. government, each of which also comes with suggested lesson plans tailored to meet state-specific learning standards. iCivics is currently working to develop its newest offering; an international relations-focused, multiplayer game that will be available on the iCivics website and on Facebook.



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