Game-for-Social-Change: A Way Home
A Game to Teach Players about a Serious Topic While Driving Civic Engagement

Suzanne Ensmann
University of Tampa

Index Descriptors: Children’s Rights, Games and Simulations

Abstract

Grounded upon the Diffusion of Innovations theory (Rogers, 2010), a prototype of a game for social improvement was developed to begin the process of systemic change. The purpose of the game is to disseminate knowledge, the first step in a systematic process to affect changing mindsets. The content’s focus is on the United Nations (U.N.) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) Treaty of 1989, precisely Article 12: The Right to be Heard and Article 13: Freedom of Expression (The U.N. International Children’s Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2009). The Treaty was created to be a beacon of light for all children. Quite simply, it is a compilation of basic human rights children should be afforded. All U.N. nations have ratified the CRC Treaty but one. Despite American presidents taking an active role in initiating and supporting this call to action, the United States still abstains from ratifying it since its inception in 1989 (UNICEF, 2009). An endogenous game was selected as the vehicle to immerse the players in real-world scenarios with additional elements of fantasy to motivate engagement (Gunter et al., 2008). Through simulated experiences, the game was designed to provide education about the given topic while the pathos was intended to evoke emotion and change attitudes (Gee, 2008; Jones, 2008). It was hypothesized that this knowledge and change in attitudes could potentially induce action leading to real-world improvement. “Knowledge is power” (Bacon, 2001) and the first step to begin change.

Introduction

Clearly the U.S. provides many protective services for child welfare and, in fact, has a constitutional amendment which affords freedom of speech for all its citizens. Is there a need for instruction to teach about rights for children with so many provisions already in place? For the children who directly encounter the inequitable unwritten practices in our constitution and judicial system, these provisions are not enough to protect their human rights. Akhil Reed Amar proposes:

*The eight thousand words of America’s written Constitution only begins to map out the basic ground rules that actually govern our land, while the unwritten perceptions guide all other judgment* (2012, p.ix).

Historically, the practice has been that adults know what is best for children and make those determinations regardless of conflicting opinions from the children (Rodham, 1973; Taylor, 2009). Examine the disparity within the court system. Criminal cases have acknowledged that children are capable of expressing their views such as in the Gault Case of 1967 (Federal Judiciary, 2015). The Juvenile Detention division may deem children “fit to be heard” yet these same children may be considered “unfit” in the Family Law division (Taylor, 2009). Likewise, children’s rights vary by state and county. Forty states provide children a voice in their own dependency cases forming an inequality for the children in the other states (Breger, 2010; Rodham, 1973). These rulings do not stem from research reflecting the children’s ability to express themselves better in one court of law over another but from legislative traditions.

What is the significance of raising awareness about a treaty of human rights designed to protect these citizens who go under the radar? Studies reflect that over half of the marriages in the U.S. end in divorce (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). If just half of those marriages have the average number of two children per household, over a million children may be in legal proceedings affecting them. Unlike the rights of the adults, however, these children’s fates are decided for them as they are often divided like the assets in the household. The decision of whether their words are considered is left up to a judicial system often not trained in mental health issues needed to make these determinations (Lemon, 1999). Even when the children are heard, their words are often
discounted based upon engrained practices (Collins, 2012). The numbers of unheard voices rise considering the almost two million children born out of wedlock and the divorced couples with multiple children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Add in the element of domestic violence (DV) which in many cases is not even considered relevant in custody cases and the need for change becomes alarming. In fact, data reflects that more domestic violence victims die at the hand of someone they were in a relationship with than someone unknown to them (Haddix, 1996). A study of survivors in DV shelters reflects that majority of their children witnessed the abuse (Haddix, 1996). Evidence reflects that children are, in fact, an integral part of these cases and have the capacity to express their views (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). These views are often not even taken into consideration in the extreme cases. The children in cases: James M. of California and Bartasavich v. Mitchell in Pennsylvania witnessed one of their parents kill the other parent. The assailants still had custody rights to the children upon their release of incarceration regardless of the children’s words (Haddix, 1996).

This game-for-social-change was designed to educate and advocate for the equal rights of all children. Overall, the CRC Treaty contains fifty-four articles and four themes: Survival, Development, Protection and Participation. The latter was the focus of the initial instruction for this first prototype, specifically Article Twelve: The Right to be Heard, and Article Thirteen: The Freedom of Expression. The ultimate goal of the instruction was designed to teach digital natives about the need to support the ratification of the CRC Treaty in the U.S., with the ultimate goal of empowering the learners to take action. This digital native population was selected as they are most accustomed to learning with digital-game-based learning, systematic thinking and processing with simulations, (Prensky, 2001).

The Background

The idea for a game to teach originated from this researcher’s experience of witnessing game based learning motivate digital natives to play and learn core subject matter. Reasoning and critical thinking became by products of this problem-solving instruction (Gordon, 1970). Research supported the advancement of the idea. In fact, studies reflect Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) is a motivational means to learn (Justice & Ritzhaup, 2015), demonstrates improved focus, learning cognition (Eichenbaum, Bavelier, & Green, 2014) and retention (Brent & Felder, 2009; Gee, 2008; Gordon, 1970). Gee posits that brain function is based upon the embodiment of sensory involvement (2008). Video games, therefore, serve as a logical platform for learning based upon how the brain actually works. Gamers are provided with a problem and select avenues of advancement based upon the information they have. Through game stimuli players advance or retreat, learning through each phase of the experience (Gee, 2008). In fact, these are the same critical-thinking and logic skills required as a basis for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) careers (Roberts, 2002).

In a diverse and troubled world, gaming could provide an equal playing field for all students to learn while promoting choice and self-expression. Failed choices lead to learning the content rather than failing the lesson (Jones & Chang, 2014; Justice & Ritzhaup, 2015). Gaming brings Bloom’s taxonomies to education in a fail-safe environment including: facts and information, comprehension opportunities, skills to master analysis and synthesis, leading into the cognitive domain where player-learners are challenged to review the process of how to excel from one level to the next (Moriarty, 1974).

To assure sound pedagogy in meeting the goals of this instruction, the design principles stemmed from the First Principles of Instruction (Merrill, 2002a, 2002b, 2007, 2009) and focus on e3 Instruction: effective, efficient, and engaging (Merrill, 2007, 2009). Activation begins with an introduction of the CRC Treaty and the basic list of rights it provides to children. A CRC icon (envisioned to be a scroll in the game) is noted in the prototype to be accessible in each scene for the player to use as a resource to see all the articles as well as which countries have ratified the CRC. Players demonstrate understanding of content by selecting the accurate answer based upon whether the CRC Treaty was ratified for that country. According to selections made, the next path provided reflects the consequences of decisions. Branches of support resources and next game level of adaptive instruction empowers players to build self-efficacy and take action as they proceed.

Aligning to the Elaboration Theory which suggests curricula should be built from the simple to the complex (Reigeluth, Merrill, Wilson, & Spiller, 1980), this instruction sequences and builds upon the foundational knowledge achieved from decisions made during each scenario. Thus, the scenarios advance from simple desires children may express to more important human rights issues. The tone is intended to be serious although the game begins with some humor to capture the attention of the player. Topics range from requests to be heard regarding breakfast choices to life-altering pleas to sleep in a safe home. Advanced layers include application activities for players to learn more about the topic and take action; travel through more scenes; and explore avenues intended to empower players with confidence building tips such as opportunities to select appropriate communication responses.
As the storyline unfolds, real-world scenes are presented in which player-learners make decisions which in turn teach them about the purpose of the CRC Treaty. Emerging branches support the player-learners in coping with feelings of sadness and empower them with feelings of hope as they learn about self-efficacy tips and actions they may take to survive the scenarios because affective domain can affect learning (Dormann, Whitson, & Neuvians, 2013).

Furthermore, DGBL was selected as the best viable option to disseminate knowledge, globalize and transforms education (Pellegrino & Scott, 2004) as DGBL is a platform players are already familiar with engaging in for hours at a time. Access is available to most users through mobile devices, computers and game consoles. Data reflects that the age range expands beyond simply the digital native and has generated in surplus of sixty billion dollars (Jones, 2008). The value of this DGBL, however, extends beyond dollars as its purpose focuses on changing attitudes, perceptions and potential social change for improvement. This game-for-social-change instruction elevates to the level of serious-games (Chen & Michael, 2006; Cody, Ritterfeld, & Vorderer, 2009; Heeter, Lee, & Peng, 2010; Ratan & Ritterfeld, 2009). Downloaded over two million times, Darfur is Dying is one such example of the extent to how serious games can spread a message (Jones, 2008). Furthermore, gaming in education has far greater capabilities of influencing player-learners than traditional methods of instruction as evidenced in the article Can a Video Game Make Someone Nice? (Kapp, 2012). This study examined participants engaging in socially positive and negative games. The scenario ranged from docile activities like picking up spilled pencils to stressful situations such as stopping an abusive lover. In both cases, player-learners who played the game persuaded others to make positive choices and were more likely to come to the aid of another (Kapp, 2012).

Gaming has also been used as a platform to educate about other treaties the U.N. has created. For example, the U.N. called for the decade from 2005 to 2015 to focus on education promoting sustainable energy. Answering the call, Ball State University in Indiana planned the development of the Second Chance Game: Local Partnerships (University-Community) for Global Awareness and Responsibility. The results of the DGBL initiative proved that imparting social knowledge and getting buy-in from key players to develop innovative strategies to educate goes beyond governments creating treaties or passing laws (Pacheco, Motloch, & Vann, 2006). Likewise, Europa games developed by the European Commission teach about the CRC to children in countries which had adopted the Treaty (EUROPA, 2011). These are exogenous games, based upon a behaviorism approach and reinforcement theory.

Justice Sandra Day O’Connor spearheaded the use of games to teach about civics and US Government (Toppo, 2015). Since 2009, over three million users have played the free iCivics games to learn about the process of government and civics, such as how judges make rulings on landmark cases to protect rights (Toppo, 2015). Lastly, the European Union Commission, EUROPA, created web-based free games specifically designed to inform children in countries about their rights in countries which had ratified the CRC (EUROPA, 2011).

Lastly, this prototype was modeled after games promoted by the Games for Change Organization (http://www.gamesforchange.org/), adding paths through the real-world scenarios to deliberately evoke empathy and transfer of knowledge (Edele, Dziobek, & Keller, 2013; Gunter, Kenny, & Vick, 2008; Huang, & Tettegah, 2010).

The question is this: Can a game designed to educate about the U.N. CRC Treaty persuade the digital natives to ratify it in the U.S. in order to begin the movement for change to ultimately achieve equal rights for children? It is hypothesized that there is evidence to support that a game would be an effective means to advocate and profoundly impact invaluable social change to better the lives of children in need. It was time to create this game to teach the U.S. children about the CRC Treaty.

“Never believe that a few caring people can’t change the world... indeed, that’s all who ever have,” Margaret Mead.

The Game-for-Social-Change Prototype was the first step in this endeavor. Artifact URL: www.purpose2day.com/site/ChildrenAroundtheWorldGame-Prototype.html

The Conclusion

The researcher designed this prototype based upon a Choose Your Own Adventure architect (Packard, 1979). Crowdsourcing returned real-world scenes which changed the persona of the characters and depicted scenes better suited outside of the classroom walls targeting the teen and adult population. Trends and themes which evolved were embedded into the game to reflect the repetitive needs expressed by children falling on deaf ears. For example, the name of the game changed to A Way Home as cases gathered continued to reflect the same underlying cry to be able to return to the home where they felt safe.
The game-for-social-change was designed to meet the gaps of the games upon which it was modeled. For example:

iCivics teachers about the national rights of the US citizens per the national amendments. A Way Home teachers about the rights of children per the global CRC Treaty. Europa, uses exogenous games to teach children about the CRC in countries who have already adopted the Treaty. A Way Home was designed as an endogenous game, which means players would literally immerse themselves in scenes to experience the benefits of adopting the CRC in the US.

Supportive tools are offered in every scene to provide guidance and feedback to players. For example, there is a CRC icon which lists the articles of the treaty, a GPS icon to help players navigate, and always the escape tunnel to offer players an outlet take control of the scenarios with access to real-world application inviting them to take action. Twinery, a web-based software was used, to design the storyline and create the intersections of the game. It started as a simple linear view and quickly blossomed to an impermeable web filled with numerous scenes from real-world cases. The prototype encompasses nine main characters, travelling and aging throughout the game, all eventually imploring the same need to be heard.

The First level is a simple fictitious scene to introduce the player to the differences between rights and responsibilities, choices and consequences and tips to respectfully communicate with adults. The next level of the game, reflects real-world cases, such as the one which portrays the life of a Boy who hides his restraining order in his sock, or the story of the children who begged their mother for help. That family escaped and sought protection outside of the country. In the real-world case, they were awarded political asylum by another country (Collins, 2012).

It’s game over when players make decisions which end in incarceration or injury. One-hundred, forty-five children died last year just in Florida due to abuse or neglect (TCPalm, 2016). These are real endings in which real children lose. Players win the game when the children Win their Day to be heard.
A way Home is a Game for Social Change. The purpose of this game is to
- Introduces players to the CRC
- Raise awareness of the need for adopting this treaty in the US and
- Motivate players with actionable items

Leading Learning for Change is not a solo affair, however. This game has been developed to the prototype stage. This researcher seeks out developers to take it to the next phase of development. Doctors Todres and. Diaz wrote in the Global Health journal just last month explaining why children's right to be heard matters:

- Participation can contribute to positive child and adolescent development. Studies show that allowing children to play a meaningful role in, and have some sense of control over, their lives have potentially significant intrinsic value (2017).

Your contribution matters. Pass this information on or join the collaborative effort in pursuit of change to improve lives for children.


