

# How Multiplayer Games Create New Media Politics

**Lars Konzack, ph.d.**

Aalborg University, Denmark  
Niels Jernes Vej 14  
DK-9220 Aalborg Oest  
+45 96 35 80 80  
konzack@vrmedialab.dk

**Thessa Lindof, ph.d.**

Aalborg University, Denmark  
Niels Jernes Vej 14  
DK-9220 Aalborg Oest  
+45 96 35 80 80  
thessa@hum.aau.dk

## ABSTRACT

In this article we will propose a framework for massive multiplayer games, giving the players a raise of consciousness in understanding politics and society. We will set a mass media politics up against a new media politics as it emerges from the use of massive multiplayer games. We will start with a definition of mass media and new media, at the same time explaining the differences between the two. Afterwards we will give a definition of serious games. We finish the article with examples of games, which can give raise to counsciousness about political and societal problems and possibilities.

## Keywords

Mass audience, multiplayer, new media, raising counsciousness, serious games, social actor

## INTRODUCTION: FROM MASS MEDIA TO NEW MEDIA

The era of mass media started with Gutenbergs printing device, making it possible to produce several copies of one book in a short time. Thus it was suddenly possible to spread a message in writing instead of by the spoken language. The writer could meet the audience, the reader, without having to be there in person. And the message could be reread and discussed by the readers. The church and the worldly governments were no longer the only ones to give their “truth” to people, and this invention was a real threat for them. Suddenly the public could read the bible, questioning the explanations of the priests about sin, paradise, and God. The Reformation, the French Revolution and the United States of America can be seen as a result from the possibilities Gutenberg’s printing press created.

The book and even the newspaper could be seen as an enlightening possibility for the reader, especially because the reader has to think and understand the written word, before he can enjoy and use the information. But with mass media like the printed press, radio, and television also

Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play.

© 2005 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

came the problem of manipulation. Mass media meant mass audience, so any person who was aware of the potential of mass media could use it in his own favor. As Habermas [1] pointed out, mass media has to be looked at as a power on its own. Adolf Hitler's use of radio and film transmissions shows the power inside this kind of media. Manipulation is evident. The main problem with mass media is the lack of interaction between the producer and the reader, listener, or viewer. The only action, a consumer of mass media is able to take would always be a "re-action". The consumer has no direct influence on a given tv-show. Even though interactive television is starting to show its possibilities, it is at the time being not able to give the consumer the power of altering the show with more than mere banalities: "Play Madonna instead of Kylie Minogue". The only real power in the hand of the consumer is to zap away to another channel or shut down the television set.

Another problem for the mass consumer is his isolation. The consumer is on his own, maybe surrounded by friends or family, but without the possible interaction with other consumers. At the same time his experience of the film or show is a mass experience. All the viewers of a given show have the same experience at the same time. Though this is changing since many television programmes have chatrooms or websides, where people can meet and discuss the shows afterwards, it still does not give the consumer a real possibility to change the tv-programmes or have a different kind of experience. It must be said, though, that these chatrooms give raise to a new consciousness in how the tv-shows are received and analysed by the mass audience. This already shows how powerfull the Internet might be in giving back the consumer his power to interfere.

As can be seen many of these problems changed character when the Internet and on-line games became part of the social environment. Especially the development of massive multiplayer on-line games has given raise to a whole lot of new possibilities in making th players conscious of the rules and structures of the surrounding world. The multiplayer's experience of the game is personal and individual, because his choices matter for how the game continues. The player makes his own choices, but still within the structures and rules provided by the game. At the same time on-line games provide the possibility of interaction with other players. This interaction can be anything from chatting with each other to killing the other player's avatar.

The new media provide the possibility of interaction – even interaction with consequences on your life or at least on the game being played. It enables the players to contact each other, thus sharing experiences, information, ideas, and even cheats. Websites with cheats for different games, on-line or not, are more and more becoming a part of the game as the games are becoming more complex. Thus the players must become better players. At the same time expert players are trying to find the limits of a game, and then use their knowledge of the game to overcome the limits and set new goals for how the game should or could be played. All of this we see as a possibility of raising the players consciousness on the issues, a given game is about.

The player is no longer a reader of the text, a consumer of mass media. No, the player is a social actor, with the words of Anne Mette Thorhauge [2]. He is part of the social environment of the game and he is taking actively part in shaping this environment, as we will show below.

### **Osgons, seriousness, and what playing is all about**

But first we will try to define what serious games are, being very critical to Gonzalo Frasca's [3,4] notion of seriousness in games. For him a game is serious if and only if it treats a serious

topic. According to Frasca, while never really defining what he means by serious games, describes a one-session game of narration (OSGON) as having irreversibility and death. These two characteristics, Frasca suggests, are the basis of a serious game. What is more, he mentions, that serious games are the opposite of genres like fantasy and science fiction like J. R. R. Tolkien and George Lucas. While Frasca may in fact despise these genres, a game on the other hand does not become serious just because it is set in a realistic environment. Even though there is a lot of bad fantasy works which claims to be inspired by Tolkien. None of these are even close to his life work [5]. This is not to say that any fantasy game is serious, but likewise any realist game isn't serious either.

What Gonzalo Frasca might be referring to is escapism. There are two kinds of escapists. One escapist tries to escape from his prison searching for a better life. The other one is the deserter escaping from his duty. The latter is of course the irresponsible. We need responsible and serious games whether or not they are realistic. Seriousness of a game ought to be judged from whether the game idea succeeds, not just if it is realist and irreversible or not.

C. S. Lewis [6] explains: "Professor Tolkien asked me this simple question, 'What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with and most hostile to, the idea of escape?' and gave the obvious answer: jailers. The charge of Fascism is, to be sure, mere mud-flinging. Fascists, as well as Communists, are jailers; both would assure us that the proper study of prisoners is prison. But there is perhaps this truth behind it: that those who brood much on the remote past or future, or stare long at the night sky, are less likely than others to be ardent or orthodox partisans."

So seriousness can be seen from various angles. From the above it can be seen, that Frasca's position must be something like this: only when the game itself is serious, then it can give rise to serious thoughts and actions. And a game can only be serious if it is stripped of everything that could be fun or make mistakes possible, without taking the consequences. Frasca is missing several points here: First of all, even in real life, where you die for good, you have the possibility to make mistakes and learn from them! Looking at children, who repeat their actions over and over again, gaining control of their environment, getting a better understanding of life, society, and everything. Even if it is possible for a player to save a game and restore it after having tried one strategy, does not mean that the failure has no consequences for the player. The player is learning the best strategy, thus becoming better in playing the game – and in understanding the structures lying behind the game. Going from novice, who just follows rules without understanding the whole game or any of the underlying ideas, to expert, where you play intuitively [7], demands the possibility of repetition, of "resurrection" of the avatar of the player, again and again. That is what playing games is all about. Or as Huizinga [8] points out that "Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life.'" Playing games is not real life, and as Piaget [9] shows: "(...) play is essentially assimilation, or the primacy of assimilation over accommodation." This means that the player is looking for a way of enhancing his knowledge and abilities. Assimilation means using existing cognitive schemata to understand a situation. Accommodation means changing or creating whole new schemata to understand and act to a given situation. So by playing the player tries to assimilate the games challenges by using what he already knows in advance. It should be fun to play, not hard work.

Coming back to Frasca's point of view, this does not imply that it is impossible to make serious games meaning games giving rise, to serious thoughts and actions. Because that is, what serious games is all about: the possibility to become conscious of underlying structures in the game, thus being able to take a step backwards, and find the best possible action to the challenge given by the game. Even though Frasca [3] gives "The Sims" the benefit of a doubt, since "(...) it deals with people", this does not make the game serious in any way. As long as the player does not understand, what the underlying idea of the game is about, he is just having fun, playing another game. The seriousness starts, when the player reaches the limits of his abilities or the limits of the game. Then he has to step back, look at the situation and try another approach. He has a breakdown in his actions [10].

But, since the main idea of playing is having fun, and as Piaget pointed out, assimilation is the main cognitive activity during play, the game has to be fun. It has to have a good gameplay, making it possible to become immersed in the game. Only then will the player be able to overcome the obstacles, which lead to the breakdown. When a breakdown occurs, the player has to change his approach to the game. A breakdown can be anything from functional faults to death of your avatar. In this situation the player learns something about the functioning of the game. In a way it is the brechtian "Verfremdungseffekt", but with the twist, that the game has to be so much fun, that the player will make an effort to win it anyway. In contrariety to mass media, the player has to do something to continue the game. He cannot sit and wait for the show to go on by itself. As Henry Jenkins points out the player can be seen as a fan or vice versa. Fandom has become "a platform for consumer activism" [11] and as such the fan of a tv-show not only influences on the show, but also uses the possibility for interaction with other fans to be a lobby for their show. Even though we are looking at players and their relation to consumerism, Jenkins' discussion of fandom shows that the consumer of today is no longer look on as a passive recipient. Playing a game is even more emerging than looking at a tv-show and discussing it. By playing a massive multiplayer game the player is creating the text, as Jenkins points out, about 60% of a game of Sims is created by the player [12].

So our idea of seriousness in a game stems from the outcome of the game: is the player forced to rethink his actions – or can he just go on as usual? At the same time, we would like to see the game being so interestingly and immersive, that the player is really having fun while playing it. Thus he will be using some effort to overcome any obstacles in the game. The player of a serious game must also be given the opportunity to discuss the game itself in the game or at least at game-related sites. This social interaction makes the reflection about the game and its gameplay possible, just like the chatroom discussions in a fancommunity makes reflection about a tv-show possible [12]. Thus a serious game is to be seen as a society of its own, made up by players from all over the world.

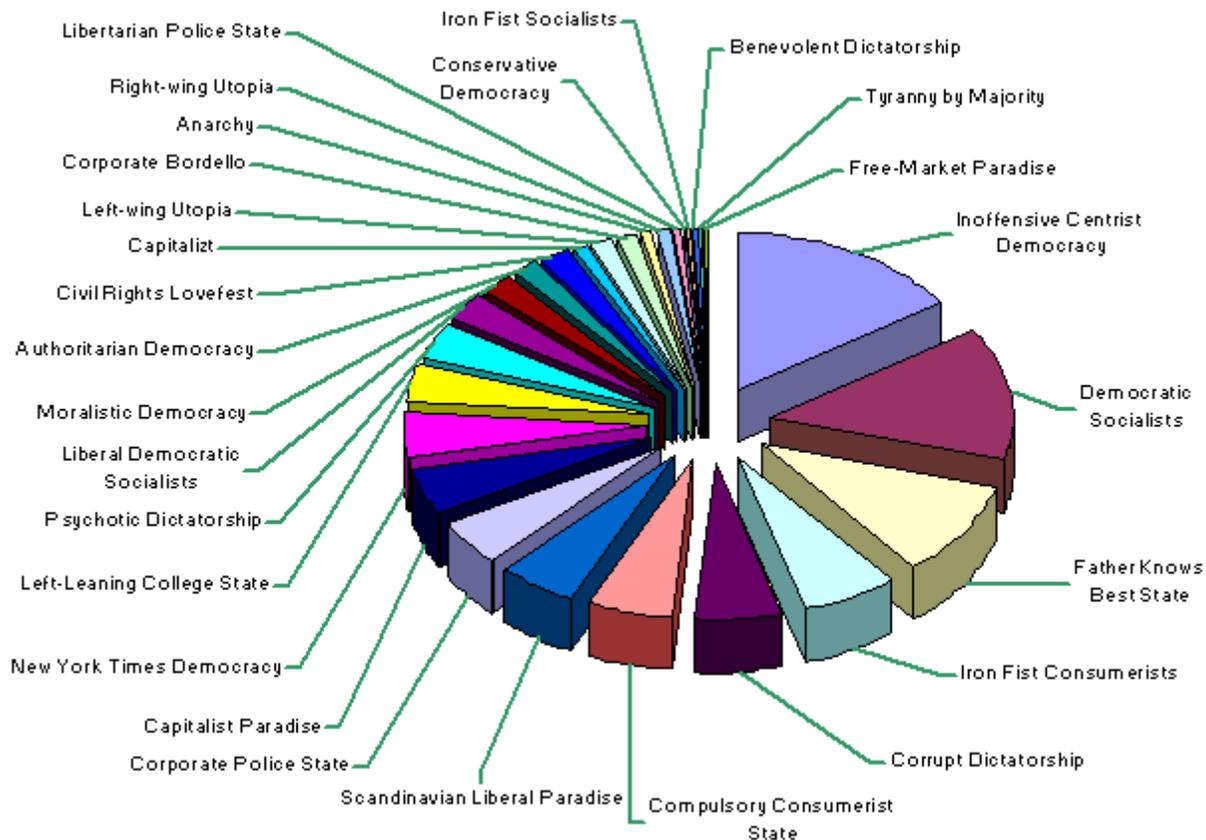
### **The games and the play: serious on-line games and their possibilities**

In the following we will give one example of a massive multiplayer on-line game, which can be both entertaining and give the possibility of a breakdown, which would cause a raise in consciousness on the players behalf.

NationStates at nationstates.net is a multiplayer nation simulation game. The player creates his own country, fashioned after his own ideals, and cares for its people or the opposite. Is this game serious? Well, according to the NationStates FAQ "NationStates does have humorous bent, but

that's just because international politics is so inherently funny.”<sup>1</sup>

The player defines his nation by a name, a flag, a currency, a national animal, and a motto. Furthermore the player is asked several questions regarding the politics of the nation. The NationStates engine uses the answers to these questions in order to find out the freedom level of civil rights, economy, and political freedom of the nation. There are 27 different categories based on the 15 different levels of each of the three kinds of freedom, indicating that the UN Category is based on slightly different background numbers than the freedom levels are (see below).



**Fig. 1:** Source: [http://ns.goobergunch.net/wiki/index.php/UN\\_Category](http://ns.goobergunch.net/wiki/index.php/UN_Category)

The UN categories may change during the game based on the player responds to issues regarding his nation. The player may start out with a Scandinavian Liberal Paradise and end up with a Psychotic Dictatorship if he so chooses.

There are no inherent goals in the game. Its up to the player to invent his own goals, however every second day there is a new top-list of nations. This top-list may be based on highest or lowest crime rates, export, and so forth making it possible for the player to reach out to different goals.

The nation may be moved to another region, either one that already exists, or a region made by

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nationstates.net/cgi-bin/index.cgi/page=faq>

the player himself. In these regions there is an open forum. Furthermore, the player may send messages to other nation “owners”. This makes it possible to role-play within the game structure. And this may in fact be part of the real game.

Even though the game does not support war between nations it is possible to role-play diplomacy. If you want to go to war, this is actually role-played rather than fought via game mechanics. One way to do this is to declare war and through negotiation with other players find out who won. This of course is based on consensus between players and accordingly players should be very disciplined in their behaviour. Another way to do this is to make a new nation and invade this nation. Again this is role-played in the open forum.

The politics of the game simulates real world politics in the designer’s point of view. The players may or may not agree with this point of view. In our own experience, we wanted our nation to stay democratic and by doing so become a nation with a higher level in political rights than just *some political rights*. In the game the issue of the right to duel came up. Being a European we thought of duelling as an aristocratic anti-democratic activity. So we banned the possibility of duelling in our country. However, the game engine responded negatively, ending up with only *few political rights*. Suddenly our nation was no longer Democratic Socialist but a Father Knows Best State. This was we imagine because free gun ownership in an American context equals (to some people at least) democracy.

This of course made us think of, how we believed in democracy. We had to reflect upon our own set of beliefs and question the set of beliefs in the NationStates simulation. Not because the game would soon end, but because these reflections made us play along with a new attitude, a much more conscious and self-conscious way of playing.

It also made us realize that indeed people played this game not just to reflect upon their own ideology, but also to reflect on ideology in general. The Queendom of Folkepartiet was a nation based on the far right Danish party Dansk Folkeparti (Danish Peoples Party) to see how they would end up. Another attempt was to see how The Holier-than-thou Empire of FeministBioengineering would seize power.

Others were playing with nerd sub-culture like for instance The Holy Republic of Rlyeh based on Cthulhu mythos by H. P. Lovecraft and The Greatest Holy Knight Dukedom of Forgotten Realms inspired by Dungeons & Dragons. They were trying out different ways to govern a nation in order to see the consequences.

Of course Nationstates is about people, so even Frasca may look at the game as being serious. But it is not one person or a family in particular, the game is working with whole nations as its smallest ingredients. And, as one of players in Nationstates did, the inhabitants in the nation could become bugs.

### **A new media politics**

Nationstates is not the only multiplayer game, which can give the player a new understanding of his view on democracy, freedom, and economy. Games like America’s Army or Ethnic Cleansing also show an understanding of civil rights and freedom. This understanding is further away from our point of view than Nationstates. But unlike a television show even the most manipulative on-line games have to be played. Which means that the player has to take action, and in that way think of the consequences of this action. Yes, his avatar may die several times,

before he is able to master the game. But the point is, that during this proces of learning, the player has to think about the underlying structure of the game. The better the player understands the structure, the better he can play.

This is what we see as the new media politics: not manipulation, but interaction and socialisation are the new possibilities of these new media. And even more so if the game itself is so complex and interesting that even the producer himself is not aware of the possibilities within it.

## **LITERATURE:**

1. Habermas, Jürgen. *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 2 vols., Suhrkamp, 1988.
2. Thorhauge, Anne Mette. "Player, Reader, an Social Actor", Melbourne DAC, the 5<sup>th</sup> International Digital Arts and Culture Conference, may 19 – 23 2003, available at <http://hypertext.mit.edu.au/dac/papers/Thorhauge.pdf>
3. Frasca, Gonzalo. "Ephemeral games: Is it barbaric to design videogames after Auschwitz?" 2000, available at <http://www.jacaranda.org/frasca/ephemeralFRASCA.pdf>
4. Frasca, Gonzalo. "The Sims: Grandmothers are cooler than trolls" in *Gamestudies* #1, 2001, <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/frasca/>
5. Shippey, Tom. *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, Harper Collins Publ., 2000.
6. Lewis, C. S. "On Science fiction" in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, Harvest Books, 2000.
7. Drefus, Hubert L. & Dreyfus, Stuart E. *Mind over Machine*, Free Press, 2000.
8. Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, The Beacon Press, 1955.
9. Piaget, Jean. *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood*, The Norton Library, 1962.
10. Winograd, Terry, and Flores, Fernando. *Understanding Computers and Cognition*, Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1986.
11. Jenkins, Henry. "Interactive Audiences? The 'Collective Intelligence' of Media Fans", 2004, available at <http://web.mit.edu/21fms/www/faculty/henry3/collective%20intelligence.html>
12. Jenkins, Henry. Interview with Henry Jenkins by Intensities, 2001, available at <http://www.cult-media.com/issue2/CMRjenk.htm#1>