A Game Developer's Perspective on Social Impact Video Games: Conclusions from a Qualitative Study

Damian Gałuszka
AGH University of Krakow
Kraków, Poland
dagal@agh.edu.pl

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Since the dawn of video games, the educational potential of virtual worlds has been recognized, demonstrated by titles such as the famous *The Oregon Trail* (1971). After decades of development, this medium is now perceived as a cultural vehicle (Cerezo-Pizarro et al. 2023) and a means for individual and social change. This has resulted in movements like Games for Change and Games for Impact (Ashton 2007) not only due to the traits of games (e.g., interactivity), but also their rising popularity among wide audiences. Consequently, more people with diverse preferences can play and learn through gaming. However, this increased recognition of the educational and socio-cultural potential of video games raises more questions. Perhaps the most important one is: how can we design, produce, and distribute games that have an impact? While there are useful answers to such questions (Grace 2019), there is more to explore, especially regarding the real-life challenges and opportunities for developing successful impact games.

The aim of the presentation is to provide video game developers' perspectives on social impact games, based on the author's qualitative research. This research draws not only from theoretical sources but also from the experiences and perspectives of practitioners who create impactful titles. The study was conducted between October and November 2024 among an international group of 15 video game creators (10 men, 4 women, 1 agender) with varying experiences in video game production, including game design and production students, academic professionals, and individuals with different levels of experience in game development companies.

For better understanding and deeper conclusions, the interviews with creators were preceded by testing sessions of their selected games that fall under the broadly defined category of social impact games, which "try to affect the learner's perspective (…) and teach or inform about social issues" (Ruggiero 2013). The experiences from these gameplay sessions were incorporated into the interview questionnaire as a set of additional questions. The scope of the selected games varies from student or game jam projects to those published as a result of international collaborations (grants), and includes empathy games portraying difficult individual situations or experiences, ecological issues, historical conflicts, or modern life challenges. This results in a

comprehensive dataset of examples. The interviews were recorded and will be analyzed using the coding technique to identify the most important themes across the gathered data (Sheppard 2020).

The interview questionnaire consists of more than 40 questions that cover topics such as:

- Interviewees' educational backgrounds and experiences in game development;
- Details about the selected game development process, including design decisions, used technology, challenges, and issues;
- The game's reception during playtests, presentations, and after release;
- Opinions about social impact or serious games, their potential and limitations, also in the perspective of older media;
- Ideas about social impact games promotion and popularization.

Finally, the themes will be categorized and synthesized into recommendations and challenges that might occur during all main stages of a video game's preproduction, production, and distribution.

This presentation will provide the audience with a better understanding of video games as a means for individual or group changes, including theoretical and practical suggestions. Therefore, it should be interesting not only for scholars focused on theoretical aspects but also for those who try to develop their own projects for DGBL (Digital Games-Based Learning) interventions.

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