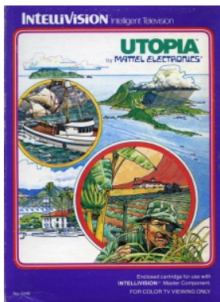


"Serious" Fun: Social, Moral, and Political Content in Video Games

Video games have become increasingly popular over the last few years. In fact, a recent survey suggests that approximately 2/3rds of American adults partake in the pursuit. But even with this emerging success, gaming continues to be dogged by decades-old accusations. Many of the medium's most ardent critics argue that games offer only vacuous experiences. Lying beyond the pixels, polygons, and interactive scenes is just empty entertainment. Or, even worse, they argue that games are only a vehicle for mindless violence and other moral corruptions. But if you ask the designers behind many games, you'll learn that they often go out of their way to include elements in their games so that they have a deeper moral, social, and political appeal.



My research specializes in understanding the things that make people engage with politics and society. Recently, this has led me to look at if and how video games can make people more politically involved. To help answer that question, I used the indispensable archive of developer notebooks and periodicals at The Strong museum to look at how (and why) game designers include morally, socially, and politically relevant ingredients in their games.

Perhaps the most obvious way that developers incorporate these types of content are in the games' narratives. Developers use space, dialogue, plot, and other narrative tools to deliver games with prominent social, moral, and political dimensions. Some games are fairly explicit in their politics. Don Daglow's *Utopia* (1982) is about being a better political ruler than your opponent—even if that means bankrolling a guerrilla insurgency against them. Other games take a more subtle approach. In *Far Cry II* (2008), for instance, the player contracts malaria and their advancement depends on how well they manage the symptoms. The game's creative director noted that this was intended to make players aware of the perniciousness (and persistence) of the disease in Africa.

Of course, games aren't just a visual medium. Games are, well, games. The experiences they offer are based, in large part, on what we as players choose to do. Fittingly, the mechanics game developers incorporate can reinforce the social, moral, and political content. Many games will use their progression systems, puzzles, and win/loss conditions to emphasize things with social weight. Will Wright's *SimCity* franchise is a beautiful example of this. Wright was greatly inspired by scientific theories of complexity and chaos, and intentionally designed the *SimCity* games with lots of moving parts so that the aggregated whole worked similarly to how real cities do. The game encourages us to play with these multifarious variables, explore how they can create different outcomes for our cities, and ask questions in the pursuit of maximizing citizen happiness. Chief among them is the question that social scientists have identified as lying at the heart of politics: "Who gets what and why?"

But why do game developers go through the effort to include these things? For some like Hideo Kojima, the mind behind the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise, it's because of deep personal beliefs. "The message of [*Metal Gear Solid*]," he told Neil West of *Arcade* in 1998, "anti-war, anti-nuclear weapons—is quite simple and pretty obvious." Others, such as the developers of *King's Quest*, do it because they felt that it made for a deeper, more engaging story. Some people just find the "game" of politics interesting and fancy a (simulated) stab at it themselves. After all, political simulation games go way back, well beyond Daglow's venerable *Utopia*. There are probably as many reasons as there are game designers.



It's important to realize that games don't just spring fully formed from the ether. They are produced by people—people who are just as affected by what's going on in the “real” world as any of us are.

To be sure, not every game is going to include social, moral, and political topics. For many players and designers alike, the fun of video games come from overcoming challenges, exploring new worlds and roles, or spending time with friends. But it's a far cry to think that many games and their developers don't wrestle with these topics and challenge us to do the same. A *Far Cry II*, if you will.

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