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by Julianne Greer

When I was thinking about what to write for this Editor's Note on serious videogames, I had originally thought to discuss the universal trend of new media evolution from humorous and fanciful to serious. And to make sure that I was correct in my assumption and to find supporting facts, I went digging for the first TV show, the first motion picture and called to mind what I knew of early stage productions in ancient Greece. In so doing, I found that my assumption was less than correct.

I say less than correct because I wasn't completely wrong – with the exception of ancient Greek plays (comedies came later and were initially frowned upon), the first widely accepted and broadcast TV shows and films were of a more jovial nature. Many have seen, either in person or in other settings, *The Howdy Doody Show* (starting 1947) or are aware of Disney's early jump onto the talking motion picture bandwagon with *Steamboat Willie* (1928). And those are some of the first widely available uses of those mediums.

However, it seems the first TV shows and motion pictures were (so far as I can tell) actually more serious. The first commercially produced film was apparently a passion play which someone filmed in 1898. And the first TV show, apparently a drama called *The Queen's Messenger*, aired in 1928, with audio broadcast over a radio station. It turns out that the Greeks weren't the exception to the rule as I'd previously supposed.

But upon further thinking, I do believe there is a pattern. Early books were non-fiction-ish accounts of real battles. The first film is a non-fiction-ish account of a real person. And the first videogames were simulations of physical games. The first entertainment media, in large part, appear to be **reflections** of our world.

Within each medium, it was not until awareness rose and artistry matured that we began to explore, not just the world around us, but our imaginations. And along with the exploration of our imaginations, came the need to understand and ponder abstract issues facing us in life. Once the media became more sophisticated, these nebulous topics could be explored. The evolution is reflection, imagination, sophistication.

And this latter is the stage at which we find videogames. The technology is becoming such that deeper and more textured experiences are possible. In order to remain relevant and fresh, the vast number of topics broached by videogames must expand outside of those fantastical ones that have been the mainstays of games past. And the issues surrounding us everyday, the interpersonal issues, the resource allocation issues, the environmental and health issues provide interesting fodder for a deeply interactive media.

And that's an exciting thought. That videogames can be a vehicle through which more people can gain a greater understanding of issues facing the world, or through which people can be educated to better their lives, or the lives of those around them, is good. That people are actually beginning to explore that possibility is great. And that's why, this week, we've dedicated this issue of *The Escapist*, "Playing for Keeps" to serious games and those who are making them.

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Uwe Boll and the German Tax Code" from The Escapist Forum:

While that may sound weird it's old news. Uwe Boll promotes this concept since day 1 and has never made it a secret.

I may not appreciate his films but I have to say that I like the guy in a "Ed Wood"-esque sense. I've seen several interviews with Uwe Boll and I think he loves films and does what he thinks "he does best".

Also financially his movies prove very successful when released on dvd/vhs.

- retronaut

In response to "The Sincerest Form of Imitation" from The Escapist Forum:

While I don't think anyone can dispute games being derivative works, it seems like [the author] painted with some pretty broad strokes claiming that almost all games are Hollywood gone interactive. We all know that fantasy games are inspired by D&D/Tolkien and



sports games are based on, well, sports, but claiming that all the others are beholden to movies for inspiration doesn't seem fair to some of the extremely creative games we've seen over the years.

It's hard to attribute simulation games like SimCity or Black & White to any particular genre of film (thankfully! "Urban Planning: The Movie" doesn't sound like a blockbuster). And while the genre is nearly dead, graphical adventures often demonstrated narratives and storytelling that outstrip that vast majority of box office offerings. There are few films that have been as resonant or personal as the story of April Ryan in The Longest Journey. The aesthetic, art direction and sheer creativity of the Lucasarts graphic adventures, especially Grim Fandango, is at a level most Hollywood films can't even aspire to. Does Super Mario Sunshine have a cinematic analog? Psychonauts? (probably one of the most underrated games of the last 2 or 3 years) Pikmin? Amplitude? There are a host of titles who take creativity to levels that most films can't even imagine. I suppose the real tragedy is that there are so many more than don't.

If [the author's] claims are that most action-based games, especially those of the FPS and RTS milieu, are more or less lockstep with cinema, I'm perfectly inclined to agree. His classification was dead-on and the list (especially Aliens) was excellent. But saying that all games, except for fantasy RPGs and sports, are derived from film seems to be selling short the creativity of Sid Meyer, Will Wright, Shigeru Miyamoto and countless others. I think they deserve more credit than that.

- Nelsormensch

In response to 'read any Good Games Lately' from The Escapist Forum:

I'm one of the other 5 that enjoyed Hudson Hawk! Although last time I watched the DVD, I began noticing more of its shortcomings..

- Lord Twilight

In response to "The Addicition of Purpose" from The Escapist Daily:

Somehow it does not surprise me that fun is an "irrelevant" motivational factor for gamers. We are in the age of leaderboards, leveling, and achievements. Having fun and reveling

in good gameplay is somehow not enough for gamers today. I enjoy competition as much as the next guy, but posting up superior numbers does not seem like a very rewarding experience to me. I want my rewards to come in the from enjoyable gameplay moments.

Maybe this is the reason innovation in game design is so slow to develop. If





A Slightly SERIOUS Primer on (FREE!) Serious Games

by Joe Blancato

A Slightly Serious Primer on (Free!) Serious Games

In the past year or so, I've been hearing things whispered about serious games at conferences and tossed around in emails. People are talking about games where you play suicide bombers, games where you're a border guard, games where you're a white supremacist. Unafraid of (and sometimes attracted to) the taboo, I figured it was time to see what this whole serious games thing was about, where the good parties were.

A few months later, the only real conclusion I've been able to draw is serious games are here to stay, and the messages they carry are as varied as the people creating them. Each time I get bored with one game, I stumble into another one with a completely different premise and point, and I shuffle further into the rabbit hole.

The good news is my investigations have been pretty cheap. A lot of serious games are released for free or as shareware; these folks are happier to change your outlook on life than they are to take your money. And as I've made my way around the internet, chasing the genre I used to ignore, I've managed to

hang onto five games that serve as a great introduction to the genre. Here, in no particular order, are the games you need to check out if you want to get serious about serious games.

Super Columbine Massacre RPG

Elephant, meet the living room. Living room, this is the elephant. *Super Columbine Massacre RPG* is enjoying its 15 minutes of infamy by getting kicked out of game festivals and talked about by our friends in the middle, the mainstream media. But as a serious game, it conveys a powerful message about violent, emotionally unstable youth and the generation that ignored them.

SCMRPG is at its best in the early morning of April 20, 1999, before you get into the meat of the game. You assume the role of Eric Harris, one of the two teenagers responsible for the Columbine High School massacre. As you explore the boy's room and basement, you're offered a window into Harris' psyche, his disaffection and his inability to see beyond the insular world of Littleton, Colorado. As he reminisces over how he and Dylan Klebold (the other boy involved in the shooting)

planned their rampage for months, learning how to manufacture bombs while quoting German nihilists, you can't help but wonder what the hell went wrong with these kids and whether or not the switch that got flipped inside them is inside you, too.

For that first 20 minutes, *SCMRPG* is the serious games genre. Then, for the next hour, you're muddling your way through an amateurish *Final Fantasy* clone made in RPG Maker. But hey, it's free, and if you're looking for a game to profoundly affect you, look no further.

3rd World Farmer

In mid-May of 2006, I'd been doing some research on African politics, and terms like "blood diamonds" and "death marches" were floating around in my head without many points of reference. I was trying to learn more about the people in sub-Saharan Africa who are constantly at the mercy of the elements, disease and roving bands of death soldiers. As luck would have it, *3rd World Farmer* landed in my inbox and gave me as cohesive a picture of life in modern Africa as can be possibly conveyed via videogame.


3rd World Farmer puts you in the shoes of a subsistence farmer, in what's presumably western Africa. You're given a family of four to control, a plot of fertile land and \$50 to build your very own agrarian paradise deep in the heart of the Dark Continent. Each year, you get a rundown on how the farm did, as well as a report of the "Yearly Event," which usually has to do with a crop failing, poachers stealing your livestock or guerillas shaking you down for your excess cash.

The game reiterates the peril in which civilians in Africa live. It's a world of Catch-22s; you can't afford to gamble on your farm, but you have to in order to ensure its survival. All it takes is one bad year to sink you, and sooner or later, that year's going to come.

Oh, and if you're interested in playing, let me give you one piece of advice, a la *The Graduate*: I want to say one word, just one word. Chickens.

Real Lives

First, I was a girl in Burkina Faso. I grew up working odd jobs and died at 65 with enough of a nest egg to leave my surviving children relatively wealthy.



For that first **20** minutes, *SCMRPG* is the **SERIOUS GAMES** genre

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Not all serious games deal with cultural phenomena or CLASS WARFARE. Some deal with terminal DISEASES IN CHILDREN

Then, I was a boy in Germany. I grew up to be a military officer and keeled over at 45 of a heart attack. After that, I was a boy in New York who couldn't land a job, despite going to college, until I was 26. You can be all this and more in *Real Lives*.

Real Lives is a semi-random, scenario-based RPG. Each instance of the game begins at your character's birth, and as you age, you make choices about spending, investing, schooling and romance. Each year, you run a chance of coming across a life-changing event, like meeting your future spouse, getting pregnant, losing your job or coming down with syphilis.

While the chances **are** random, the stats you're born with and alter by going to school and choosing how you spend your free time (for example, if you choose to spend your time playing sports, your Endurance, Strength and Attractiveness go up, but you might lose some points in your Intelligence by not focusing directly on your studies) affect how likely you are to cope with trauma. The calamities differ by the socioeconomic status of the country. And when you're born, you're able to get a quick rundown of the

country's financial, social and political welfare by reading popup information and checking out a few tabs built into the interface.

While *Real Lives* does a great job of exemplifying why it sucks to be a woman in the Third World, its randomizer is a bit heavy-handed. In my numerous run-throughs, I never once had a character who led a normal life, even my aforementioned American character. (He pulled a Gingrich and left his wife as she lay in the hospital, paralyzed. Then, he made a fortune on the stock market in his 50s, but a series of foul-ups left him on the government dole by the time he was 90.) No, the message you'll take away from *Real Lives* is **you are a statistic waiting to happen**. Be wary.

Also, helpful tip for surviving in the third world: Don't breed if you can avoid it.

Re-Mission

Not all serious games deal with cultural phenomena or class warfare. Some deal with terminal diseases in children. *Re-Mission*, created by HopeLab, is designed to help educate kids with cancer about what exactly is going on in their bodies,

as well as how various medications treat the problem.

Running on an impressive-looking 3-D shoot-em-up engine, you take on the persona of Roxxi, a personified "nanobot," who, with the help of a holographic, R2D2-like helper, attacks different types of cancer cells within patients' bodies. Roxxi also deals with the effects her weapons (chemotherapy, radiation and antibiotics) have on her patients, sending signals to them to help them deal with the nausea and pain brought on by real-life cancer treatments. As she battles her way through 20 different levels and multiple patients, Roxxi conveys the sense that there's always a chance to beat the disease. And to a scared kid sitting in a hospital bed 24 hours a day, Roxxi is a friend who never stops thinking positively.

HopeLab distributes *Re-Mission* to hospitals for free.

America's Army

Arguably the granddaddy of them all, at least from a publicity standpoint, *America's Army* is both a shining example of how good serious games can

be and a shining example of how dangerous they are in capable hands. While many aspects of the game are accurate, *America's Army* is dripping with propaganda by omission.

For instance, the game takes you through basic arms and specialist training, and the combat engine is top-notch, but at no point in the gameplay are you ordered to scrub toilets because the skinny kid in your platoon fell out on a run. You're a hero out killing terrorists and making the world safe, but you're never the guy in Kansas dodging tornados while monitoring arms shipments. On top of that, the brutality of the combat scenes is glossed over, as cartoonish as *Counter-Strike*.

When you look at this as a recruitment tool (and it seems to be working - as part of an aggressive, \$2.2 billion investment in changing recruitment methods, the Armed Forces are no longer missing their enlistment quotas, like they were before *America's Army* released in 2002), you're forced to wonder just what serious games can do when the wrong person is controlling the message. That alone makes *America's Army* worth a play.

Oh, and it's pretty fun, too.

But Seriously, Folks

While these games should jumpstart you into the power circle at game industry cocktail parties, they're just jumping-off points. As development tools drop in cost, activists around the world (including the Third World) are turning to games to get their message out. They're making points by inserting the audience into a reality they normally wouldn't be a party to, and the effect is profound. It's plain to see, big things are coming.

Just make sure you know who's behind the curtain. [COMMENTS](#)

Joe Blancato is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. He quotes Wayne's World and Dr. Strangelove more often than what can be considered normal.



♦♦ America's Army is dripping with
PROPAGANDA by
omission ♦♦

Gaming for Change

How one non-profit
wants to **CHANGE
THE WORLD.**

by Troy Goodfellow

The generalissimo seemed weaker than the briefing had led us to believe. Our resistance movement had already sapped the loyalty of the radio station and the national courts. Maybe one big demonstration would be enough to turn them completely and put the tyrant on the run. So, we scheduled a rock concert in the park and distributed fliers around the capital.

Big mistake. The army acted quickly, rounding up the leadership of the resistance and shooting them. Our once promising movement was reduced to an old man and a student, neither of whom had any useful organizational skills. The dictator would remain in power.

This is one of the big lessons of *A Force More Powerful*, the non-violent conflict simulation developed by BreakAway Games in partnership with The International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. "Many activist groups have a tendency to want to do something to get attention," Hardy Merriman, the Director of Programs and Research at ICNC, explains. "*A Force More Powerful* disincentivizes constant action because movements can get quashed before they have the capacity to effectively resist." For

gamers programmed to push for constant action, it's a notable change in philosophy.

One could argue that the entire idea of *A Force More Powerful* is a change in philosophy from most games. Though all of us are familiar with the setup – unsavory leadership oppresses the people and must be humbled – AFMP forces you to confront the challenge through entirely non-violent means. "The game is still confrontational," says BreakAway's lead designer, Ananda Gupta. "You have to stand up to the régime. And there is still violence, but it's all coming from the people in power. The challenge is requiring the player to use non-violence only."

A Force More Powerful was built to fill a need that the ICNC saw in the activist movement. The game takes its name from an Emmy-nominated documentary series on the history of the civil disobedience movement. The series' Executive Producer, Jack DuVall, and Peter Ackerman, an editor on the project, are the principal founders of the organization. Though compatible with classroom activities in traditional learning environments, the organization found that its films and written materials

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were being used as training tools by non-violent resistance groups around the world. "Written and filmed knowledge on these types of movements are readily available," Merriman says, "but they weren't intended as learning instruments. Since research shows that learning through doing is more effective than learning through reading, a game seemed natural."

Merriman admits that there was some skepticism in the non-governmental organization (NGO) world. "There's a learning curve for various NGOs. Plus there is the usual amount of questioning because it is new." But even before the game was finished, it was getting mainstream media publicity for its goals and intent. By 2006, *A Force More Powerful* had become one of the poster titles in the serious games movement, getting coverage in the *New York Times*. "It's an irresistible story for the media."

ICNC had the research credibility to make a non-violent game, but needed the design expertise to get it done. They first went to Booz Allen Hamilton, a D.C.-based consulting firm that worked on serious games in the wargame arena. "It was too small for Booz Allen," says Deb

Tillett, the Vice President of Development at BreakAway Games. "The non-violent aspects didn't quite fit with their Defense Department experience, either. But they pointed ICNC to us."

Most gamers will recognize the BreakAway Games name from its hit retail titles. Founded by MicroProse veteran Douglas Whatley in 1998, the company developed such critically acclaimed games like city-builder *Emperor: Rise of the Middle Kingdom* and the *Conquests* expansion for *Civilization III*. In 2002, BreakAway opened BreakAway Federal Systems, a concept-based development house devoted to serious games. It has developed such varied simulations as a virtual flight deck for pilots and a convoy escort simulator that is being used to train drivers heading for the Middle East. BreakAway has not turned its back on recreational games, but the Maryland-based company has taken advantage of its proximity to Washington, D.C. to expand its skill set and markets.

Yet in spite of its "serious" purpose, *A Force More Powerful* doesn't stray too far from what may be familiar to most gamers. It is divided into planning and

execution phases, requires upgrading of skills and recruiting of workers, and has cut scenes to dramatize major events in the game. It even has a scenario editor, a particularly important tool for a game whose relevance is highly dependent on the portrayal of historical events. And, like many strategy games, it draws its strength from a foundation of academic research and historical interpretation.

The theoretical basis of the non-violent game is founded on two major texts in the movement. First is DuVall and Ackerman's *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Non-Violent Conflict*, the companion book to the PBS series. It examines the evolution of non-violent movements from Tsarist Russia to the post-Cold War world. Second is Robert Helvey's *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals*, an essential primer on how these resistance movements choose and reach their goals. "We didn't incorporate all the variables from all the models," Merriman says, but this research foundation was crucial in keeping the project on track.

Gupta says, "The ICNC had a panel of academic advisors who proved to be





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FAMILIAR TO MOST GAMERS

useful as 'reality checkers.'" Since this was intended as a teaching tool, this panel insisted that the game let the player do the initial strategic analysis. The player picks which of many goals to prioritize and how quickly they should be met. It also discourages thinking of crisis situations as "us vs. them" scenarios. Both the government and the resisters are many-headed beasts; not everyone is as committed to the cause as black and white thinking would lead you to believe.

"People in these groups have such lofty goals," says Merriman. "But they don't always do the concrete analytical work that they need." *A Force More Powerful* is, in his opinion, an important tool in reminding these groups that basic research is the foundation of any strong movement.

The nature of the audience also determined the technical limits of the game. *A Force More Powerful* is a day planner, organized by dates and assignments. The images are relatively low resolution and animations are repeated ad nauseum. This looks nothing like a modern strategy game. "If we are targeting internationally," Gupta explains, "we need to keep the minimum specs low. This could be running on machines in

the Third World." But Gupta is convinced that the low technical requirements improved the final product by forcing the team to concentrate on what was most important. "We were convinced that we wanted to keep the 3-D world for cities. This meant that we needed to find other ways to reflect the national map." The result was a stylized map and an interface that needed little explanation. "These aren't necessarily gamers."

The technical limitations notwithstanding, Tillett doesn't think that the parameters of the project constrained her team in any way. "My folks became just as passionate about the subject as the non-profit guys. I couldn't tell who was on whose team some days." The long development time for the game also meant both sides had a chance to fine tune the project. "The typical cycle for game design is 18 months," says Tillett. *A Force More Powerful* was in development almost three years, from conception to release. "We did a prototype, and then the ICNC would use it for further fundraising." The non-profit focus group tested the game to make sure that they were hitting all the important points.

Is it working? Merriman says he can't be sure. "We haven't done the empirical research to see if people are getting the messages we are trying to teach." The game has only been out for a year, and the "unofficial" distribution channels make it difficult to know how widely the game is being spread. "Promotional copies were sent out to NGOs, some of the press and conferences, and these activist groups will get information any way they can. *A Force More Powerful* is probably being burned and distributed further than we know." The game is currently used in university courses on non-violence, and ICNC is confident that its exposure will only increase as the word-of-mouth in the activist community grows.

There are already plans for an updated version. *A Force More Powerful* isolates crises to a national political context, missing a lot of the global and economic factors that can be critical to a movement's success or failure. ICNC wants to include this international dimension in future editions of the game to give players that "world is watching" feeling that gave the Orange Revolution and the fight against apartheid such

energy. The world will certainly be watching them. [COMMENTS](#)

Troy S. Goodfellow is a freelance writer based in Maryland. He reviews strategy and wargames for a number of outlets and maintains a blog at www.flashofsteel.com.



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BUZZ GAMES

In prediction markets,
you're not just the player,
you're the product

by Allen Varney

From Stonehenge and ancient goat guts to the Cold War's Delphi Method to today's election stock markets, policy gurus have always tried to divine the future. Now, they've started playing online games. Modern "prediction markets" – *Hollywood Stock Exchange (HSX)*, the *Yahoo/O'Reilly Tech Buzz Game* and many others – turn their player base from customers into products. These games tap collective expectations of the player base – their buzz – and the publisher analyzes or sells the results. Customers for this data include the entertainment industry, big media, advertisers and marketers, and

anyone who wants to get out in front of public taste without sacrificing a goat.

We never discuss it in such frivolous terms, but the stock market, not to mention the world economy itself, is a gigantic game – not (just) in the symbolic or existential sense, but literally. Participants take specified actions, narrowly constrained by rules meant to protect the system and discourage abuse. The money they gain or lose is their score. The Federal Reserve and equivalent international institutions are the referees. The outcome of the investors' actions, though unpredictable, is totally determined. Theoretically, if you had complete knowledge of all actions, you could predict stock movements with absolute accuracy. Of course, innumerable players and deeply obfuscated data make the process unknowable in advance. Yet together, investors arrive at a financial judgment of every company on the market.

Buzz games take their game designs straight from the New York Stock Exchange. Using play currency or sometimes real money, players buy

"shares" or "contracts" in a property offered by the publisher, such as an upcoming movie, a political candidate or a hypothetical news event. ("Gasoline will reach \$3.50 a gallon in the U.S. by June 30.") The changing price of a share in that property reflects the market's evolving judgment of the movie or candidate's success, or the likelihood of the event. At some defined point, such as after the movie's release or the candidate's election, the property is "cashed out" and investors receive profits based on the shares they bought.

Prediction markets assume that a large population of diverse individuals, if each acts independently with access to good information, will collectively arrive at a sensible conclusion. In fact, these games do seem to reliably outperform standard opinion polls, at least by a percentage point or two. They can boast high-profile successes, like the venerable Iowa Electronic Markets' predictions of presidential elections; the 2004 and 2006 election blowouts, when *TradeSports* correctly picked every Senate and Congressional race; and the *Hollywood Stock Exchange's* excellent record of Oscar picks: In the last three

years, its success rate in the top eight categories was 92 percent.

Who buys this data, and why? The *HSX* About page says, "HSX syndicates the data collected from the Exchange as market research to entertainment, consumer product and financial institutions, and as original content to radio, television and print media." The *HSX* client list includes Warner Bros., MGM and Black Entertainment Television. A prediction market bibliography offers many technical research reports analyzing their benefits. And they never once mention sacrificing a goat.

The doctrine of common wisdom underlies the jury system, democracy, academic peer review and, indeed, language itself. Section I.LVIII of Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* (written circa 1513-17) is titled "The Multitude is Wiser and More Constant Than a Prince":

[A]s for prudence and stability of purpose, I affirm that a people is more prudent, more stable, and of better judgment than a prince. Nor is it without reason that the voice of the

people has been likened to the voice of God; for we see that widespread beliefs fulfill themselves, and bring about marvelous results, so as to have the appearance of presaging by some occult quality either weal or woe. (Tr. Ninian Hill Thomson, 1883)

With recent web successes like Wikipedia, the idea of common wisdom has gained new popularity. *New Yorker* Financial Page columnist James Surowiecki published *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations* (Little, Brown, 2004). (Surowiecki wrote about prediction markets in his March 24, 2003 *New Yorker* column.) Dr. David Pennock, architect of the Yahoo *Tech Buzz Game*, blogs about prediction markets at Oddhead. "Prediction Market Central," an eccentric "vortal" ("vertical portal") run by Chris F. Masse, is worth a look.

And buzz games, as decentralized problem-solving systems, have become big business. *Business Week* covered them extensively in its August 3, 2006 issue. *TradeSports Betting Exchange*, based in Ireland, has traded 70 million

real-money prediction contracts worth over \$2.3 billion, and in 2001 launched a non-sports arm, *InTrade*. Now 10 years old, *Hollywood Stock Exchange*, "the world's longest continuously operating prediction market," has nearly 625,000 active players and half a dozen fansites that read like stock-tip newsletters. NewsFutures runs a prediction market for the World Economic Forum, the Davos guys who control much of the planet. Speaking of running the planet, both Microsoft and Google use internal markets. Dinky but hopeful newcomers track futures for domain names (*itsdEx*) and Amazon product sales (*Smarkets*).

Even the BBC runs a celebrity stock exchange, *Celebdaq*.

You, yes **you**, can start your own buzz game. Consensus Point, which runs both *The Foresight Exchange* and *BizPredict*, is one of many companies offering proprietary, custom-built in-house markets for corporate intranets. On the web, CrowdIQ and Inkling both let you define your own markets and contracts. CrowdIQ also offers a good overview of information markets. Open-source roll-your-own solutions include Zocalo and FreeMarket.



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Perhaps prediction markets may grow even bigger someday. Robin Hanson, Associate Professor of Economics at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, has proposed "futarchy" – predictions as a system of government. In "Futarchy: Vote Values, but Bet Beliefs," Hanson expounds the idea: "In futarchy, democracy would continue to say what we want, but betting markets would now say how to get it. That is,

elected representatives would formally define and manage an after-the-fact measurement of national welfare, while market speculators would say which policies they expect to raise national welfare. The basic rule of government would be: When a betting market clearly estimates that a proposed policy would increase expected national welfare, that proposal becomes law."


One of Hanson's attempts to use markets in government met a calamitous end. In 2001, the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) funded a prediction market research program. One of the winning bidders,

Net Exchange, undertook to forecast political and military instability by creating a public real-money Policy Analysis Market (PAM); Hanson was a subcontractor on PAM. He writes, "For each nation in each quarter of a year, we planned to have traders predict its military activity, political instability, economic growth, US military activity, and US financial involvement. In addition, traders would predict U.S. GDP, world trade, U.S. military casualties, and western terrorist casualties. ... [W]e wanted to let our traders predict combinations of these, such as how moving U.S. troops out of Saudi Arabia would affect political stability there, how that would affect stability in neighboring nations, and how all that might change oil prices."

In December 2002, PAM fell under the purview of DARPA's Information Awareness Office. The IAO was run by DARPA executive Admiral John Poindexter, whose 1990 felony convictions for conspiracy, obstruction of justice, perjury, fraud and other Iran-Contra Affair crimes had been reversed on a technicality. At the IAO, Poindexter drew widespread public criticism for his

Orwellian "Total Information Awareness" proposal, a "counterterrorism information architecture" that could eventually data-mine all government databases to assemble dossiers on private citizens. On July 28, 2003, this criticism carried over to PAM, when two senators denounced the program as a "terror market." Oregon Senator Ron Wyden wrote, "Some of the possibilities the Policy Analysis Market website offers for sale are the overthrow of the King of Jordan, the assassination of Yasser Arafat, and a missile attack by North Korea. ... Terrorists themselves could drive up the market for an event they are planning and profit from an attack" – so PAM would become not so much a prediction market as its malign variant, an assassination market.

PAM brought a firestorm of ghastly publicity. DARPA cancelled it immediately, and Poindexter resigned a month later. (Several Total Information Awareness programs are still funded under classified appropriations.) In a *Slate* commentary called "Bookmakers for the Bomb-Makers," Daniel Gross observed that "the market might defeat itself. The Pentagon wanted to create the



The pentagon wanted to create the PAM in order to gather information it could use to stop terrorism and reduce instability.

PAM in order to gather information it could use to stop terrorism and reduce instability. If it saw, say, that people were betting heavily on the assassination of Iraq's interim president, the Defense Department would start searching for some assassination plot in the hopes of rooting it out. But preventing the assassination would cause all the people who bet on it to lose their money. Insofar as the market helped the United States stabilize the region and prevent terror, investors would suffer. The more it succeeded on policy, the more it would fail as a market, and the sooner it would collapse."

One interestingly irate blogger, among many, was "Greg" at The Talent Show. On July 29, 2003, he wrote, "If there's anything to be learned from the last few years, it's that rampant speculation can often obscure an economic (or in this case, terrorist) reality. Any number of factors could quickly lead to a terrorist threat being falsely exaggerated to the point of turning into the Enron of this pseudo-market."

The unanswered question: Are buzz games fun?

In principle, there's no reason they can't be. Buzz games don't belong to the "serious games" category, in that they have no avowed educational goal. Rather, they are what Carnegie Mellon professor Luis von Ahn calls "games with a purpose" – games that "run a computation in people's brains rather than in silicon processors." These markets embody the general Web 2.0 emphasis on community intelligence, or "crowdsourcing."

From a design standpoint, all these buzz games are the exact same game. True, some let you buy options or sell short while others don't, but it's all buying and selling. People complain that most MMOGs are whack-a-mole level grinds, but at least some of them make token efforts to satisfy different player types (socializers, explorers, etc.). In contrast, if you don't enjoy buying and selling, the activity itself, then not one of these buzz games will interest you. Casual entertainment isn't what they're for.

Buzz gameplay also differs from other online games in that you're supposed to

be relentlessly rational. One big part of the attraction of MMOGs, at least for some players, is the ability to act without consequences – to fling yourself against a higher-level monster, for instance, just to see how fast you die. In a buzz game, such frivolity would damage your ranking and pollute the data.

Furthermore, guilds are right out. To elicit the wisdom of crowds, the publisher wants a good statistical sample; each individual must exercise independent, decentralized judgment. Linked crowds become vulnerable to "information cascades" that lead to mob folly. The more individual voices in the choir, presumably, the better its chance to hit the right note.

If you get deeply invested in a buzz game, wouldn't it be more sensible to get deeply invested in, you know, investments?

You have to wonder – if you get deeply invested in a buzz game, wouldn't it be more sensible to get deeply invested in, you know, investments? The energy you expend on buying and selling fake stocks should translate well to real stocks or (more appropriately, if you're coming from the prediction market) futures derivatives, as trafficked on HedgeStreet. Conversely, if you go bankrupt in several buzz games, that's a hint to stick to Treasury bonds and a 401(k). Maybe these **are** educational games after all. [COMMENTS](#)

Allen Varney designed the PARANOIA paper-and-dice roleplaying game (2004 edition) and has contributed to computer games from Sony Online, Origin, Interplay and Looking Glass.



SERIOUS GAMES Then and Now

by Chris Oltyan

Then

"We don't do that type of thing" was the response I got when looking to partner my small startup studio with a larger game studio for a serious game project six years ago. We wanted to create a simulator to present, in an interesting way, the policy decisions an EPA official would have to make to protect both the economic development of a region and its natural resources. It sounded cool to me, but it was alien to many developers

I talked to. In their minds, serious games were nothing more than distractions if not outright evil attempts by the government to twist games to their own wicked ends.

There was no doubt dealing with the government was very restricting. There were rules, regulations, procedures and accounting (shudder). Many developers didn't want to deal with annoyances like running a business or project management, much less fill out multiple-page grant documents. There were exceptions, but most developers were only serious about fun.

Isn't a "Serious Game" an Oxymoron?

No, but they are very popular with the military intelligence community. In fact, some of the best known serious games came from military applications, and the genre owes a lot of its success to government contracting. *Marine Doom*, a *Doom* mod designed to teach teamwork, coordination and decision-making to U.S. Marines, helped catapult the serious games genre into notoriety. *Doom's* popularity - and its questionable content - helped generate the initial buzz about this emerging market.

The term "serious game" really caught on when the incredibly controversial *America's Army* was released. Not only were our precious games being used by the government to recruit children, but they were giving it away for free! This would anger both developers and publishers as well as many in the American public. It didn't stop the Army, but it did give the spotlight to the growing serious games market.

The limelight given to controversial games with flashy graphics outshone the long tradition of military gaming. Some of the earliest examples we have of games in history have martial traditions. Serious games just happened to be a sexier turn of phrase. I know it's hard to imagine something taking off in America just because of its sex appeal, but it's true.

All this hoopla overshadowed the existing \$20 billion modeling, training and simulation market already in existence. Companies like Northrop Grumman and Boeing had been building applications that used interactive elements and computer graphics for decades. Usually attached to multi-million dollar sets of computers, the graphics were lacking, but the number

Today, a serious game is simply a game with a primary purpose

crunching was spot on. There's a huge debate over whether a simulation is a game or something else, but as long as *Microsoft Flight Simulator* is considered fun (more power to you; enjoy), I'd say the distinction is moot. When you use an interactive interface as the primary delivery medium for an application, you're stepping into game territory.

But that's just the military. The term "serious game" has moved far beyond this limited shell and now encompasses a huge variety of activities. Today, a serious game is simply a game with a primary purpose other than entertainment.

But Seriously, Who Would Make These Games?

Large defense contractors aside, some game companies have been involved in serious games for decades. BreakAway is a notable example of a game company with strong roots in government contracts. With multi-million dollar deals in the serious games side that dwarf their traditional game budgets, it's not hard to see why it's an important part of their company.

It is easy to find issue with some practices in the videogame industry, and a company with a focus in serious games can address many of these complaints with ease. Want your work to be meaningful to the world? Why not help train people to better save lives and treat diseases. Companies like Virtual Heroes are using this angle, combined with a focus on quality of life issues, to attract some top videogame industry talent to the Serious Side.

Now

Today, some of the most popular games on the market can be considered "serious games." With a focus on training your mind, *Brain Age* has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that a game can

have goals other than entertainment and still be a commercial success.

Once upon a time, game companies paid to use recognizable trademarks in their games. Now, advertisers' monetary contributions are an important part of many game budgets. There's nothing subtle about some of the more recent forays of advertising into games. Games are being used as a powerful medium for communicating brand images and political ideas to the world.

Corporations are even getting in on the action. We are a demographic that, if in front of the TV, is more likely to be playing a game than watching a show, and the aging corporate hierarchy has finally realized this. After a decade of trying to reach out to the best and brightest college grads and losing over and over again to younger, sexier companies, they have finally realized that ours is a generation weaned on games. Corporate recruitment is now becoming the focus of these behemoths as they struggle to find the talent they need to grow and beat the competition, and they are turning to games to do it.

While serious games may have begun life as mods to existing game engines, they have grown to become incredible areas of collaboration with academia and playgrounds for experimental game design. The tables have turned. As we struggle in our sequel-driven, licensed-based market, if we want to continue to be serious about fun, we should all take a hard look at what serious games are doing today. [COMMENTS](#)

After years of serving as a liaison between giant squids and their hated bioluminescent jellyfish neighbors, Chris Oltyan emerged from the watery depths to work at 1st Playable Productions, where he is currently the Production Coordinator.

other than entertainment

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