

Serious Games in a serious world

Introduction

In a world where computers and gaming become more and more part of everyday life, developing certain skills can be hard. Children don't play outside as much as they used to, and are more often expected to grow up well before their time. They miss learning skills they used to learn through playing. An example of this is "falling down". When I was younger I learned how to fall by just, well, falling on my face. Nowadays, parents get more and more protective of their children and don't let them play as much, or as carefree. One can even send their toddler to a course "Falling for toddlers"^[1]. It sounds ridiculous, but is apparently necessary in the eyes of these parents.

With the introduction of computers and the internet, the whole world changed. A whole new means of communication was born, and with that, a whole new generation of children learning in a different way as their parents learned. At elementary school, Kindergartners learn shapes and colours using computer games. These educational games are used as an addition to the learning material received from their teacher. Throughout elementary school, the computer becomes more and more important for these children. They get more learning games on different subjects, they need to find information on the internet for a presentation or project, they communicate with classmates via social networks, etc. Besides the time they spend on a computer at school, they also spend a great amount of time on a computer while at home or at a friend's house. Either playing an (online) game, or being active on a social network. Why not use the time they spend on a computer, be used for a serious purpose?

Serious games for a serious purpose

While a lot of games played nowadays are merely meant for enjoyment, there are other games available as well. I have named one already, the educational games. These games can be used in addition to other learning material and are most often used in a learning environment. Educational games are serious games, but serious games include more. Serious games are games with a serious purpose, or goal. Serious games will teach you skills you can use later on in your life or career. These are not covered by educational games alone. There are also serious games teaching a certain social skill, or skill you would not normally learn, for whatever reason^[2].

Most serious games are a way to solve a problem. This can be a problem with loitering youth or teaching military personnel how to act in a certain situation which cannot be re-enacted in real life. Games with a purpose.

Fun in a serious game?

Serious games do not sound very alluring when described like this. Luckily, serious games are not serious all the time. Since it is important to implement a certain "fun"-factor in learning, serious games are fun as well as educational. Without "fun", people would not like to play the game. Perhaps you can relate by thinking about being forced to play Monopoly, but without the colours and possibility to buy streets, houses or hotels. This takes all the fun out of the game, and you would not want to play. Or visualise a game which is over after 2 minutes, and you have achieved nothing. This is no fun, and would not stimulate to play again.

So, a serious game should be fun as well as educational^[3]. But what sort of skills can be learned, and when is a game serious or not? Is there a standard?

Standard games

No, there is no standard serious game. Serious Games have different purposes or goals, and are usually made using different game platforms. Therefore the look, feel and narrative of a game is always different. One thing they do have in common, is they all exist for a certain purpose. This purpose is learning people a certain skill. These people can vary in all ages, races, genders, etc. This skill can be all sorts of things. No game can therefore be the same.

Serious games are used in very different settings. Corporations, organisations and educational institutions use serious games for training, instructions, recruitment and selection, marketing and so on. Take for example the installation sector in the Netherlands, they try to interest youths in a job in a technical field as well as teaching them occupational health and safety rules via an online game^[4].

A very different example is a game made for the Province Utrecht^[5]. In this game, you are an employee of the archive and you have to return the different treasures of Utrecht to their place in the archive. You learn things about the history of the city along the narrative of the game.

Are you serious?

You might think that you learn skills from several entertaining games as well. For example World of Warcraft. You learn how to aim, you learn how to shoot, or don't you? Ever tried shooting in real life? Or aiming using your arm and hand instead of just your mouse? It's a big difference in experience, and in mastery of skill. Of course, a game created to teach you how to cook will show you the recipes, and how to slice a carrot, but in real life, you still have to watch out you don't slice your fingers instead.

A serious game does not teach you how to drive your car, it just teaches you the rules, the theory. It also doesn't teach you which words to use when talking to your neighbour, but it does lower the boundaries you might feel in real life. If in a game setting based on your own neighbourhood, you could meet neighbours online, taking away the first hurdle of getting to know each other.

PlaySocial

As our final project^[6] we have come up with a serious game that teaches social skills. As *PlaySocial* we are developing a game in which people not only profit in the (virtual) game world, but also in real life. With the project "The Big Dipper", we create a non-threatening environment for people from a neighbourhood to meet and talk to or with each other. Through games online, people learn things about each other's culture through food. Also, they will have met online, which should make the step to meeting in real life smaller. Teaching them social skills as talking with your neighbour, respecting cultures, ages, etc.

The future of serious games

With the gamification^[7] of our society, companies, governments and organizations are starting to see the value of gamifying different aspects of life. This is already shown in the use of serious games as mentioned above. In the future I believe serious games will be more frequently used for learning social skills, as well as other skills. This should always happen in a safe, virtual, environment, in addition to a real life social environment.

In short, serious games cannot exist on their own. They cannot solely replace teachers, parents or contact between peers in regards to teaching social skills. They can be a good addition, and help changing unwanted behaviour or teaching how to perform certain tasks. In no way I would suggest serious games are the answer to all problems people have nowadays with social interaction. When used properly, the user could benefit from the skills they achieved in the game and apply this in real life.

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