

The Potential of Serious Digital Games for Human Rights Education

Sonja Gabriel

KPH Vienna/Krems

ABSTRACT

The recent years have seen an increase in serious games dealing with topics that go well with human rights education. The first digital game wanting to make people aware of the situation of refugees is *Escape from Woomera* (2003). The results of a web-research show that a majority of serious games focus on topics around refugees and poverty – most of them wanting to evoke empathy for the groups depicted. The Serious Games Design Assessment (SGDA) Framework is introduced as a tool to find out if a certain game might be used to achieve the objective the designer had in mind when designing the game. Using the game *Bury Me, My Love* the approach is explained in detail. The conclusion of the game-analysis shows that *Bury Me, My Love* can be regarded as a successful example of a serious game wanting to show what it means to go on the dangerous journey from Syria to Europe.

Keywords: Human Rights; Games for Change; Serious Games; Game-Design; Teaching.

Introduction

The right to education is one of the central human rights and it also includes the right to learn about human rights. As stated by the OHCHR | Human Rights Education and Training' (n.d.), this is especially important as "values, beliefs and attitudes that encourage all individuals to uphold their own rights and that of others" are conveyed by human rights education and thus can help to create a just society as well as prevent human rights violations. The World Programme for Human Rights Education which started in 2005 is currently in its third phase which should strengthen the first two phases and ensure that people are provided with knowledge and skills as well as develop their attitudes and behaviors (United Nations, 2014). The number of serious games dealing with human rights topic has been on the rise for the last years. However, there has not been much research in how far these games might change people's attitudes and if that's possible which game-design elements help the games to succeed.

Games for change which can be described as games with a purpose beyond play (Klopfer, Osterweil, & Salen, 2009) aim to change behaviour or attitude of gamers. Therefore, they go well with the aims of human rights education which are often divided into learning about, by and for human rights. Learning about human rights includes knowing about facts like basic documents and organizations as well as understanding the difference between rights and duties or critical thinking with regards to human rights. Learning by human rights refers to attitudes, values and making judgements like reflecting, recognizing manipulation, develop empathy or criticizing human rights violations. Finally, there is learning for human rights which refers to decision-making and responsibility, empowerment and acting within the meaning of human rights.

A Brief History of Digital Human Right Games

Digital games for human rights education have been developed for about fifteen years. "Escape from Woomera" (2003) is one of the early attempts to focus on human rights in a digital game. The game puts players in the role of an Iranian asylum seeker whose request for asylum has been denied and who therefore decides to plan his escape from Woomera. As the game does not offer a lot of choice for the players, they should feel like the playable character – being restricted and frustrated because of not having many choices and possibilities where to go and what to do. Poremba (2013: 359) points out: "Woomera succeeds less by immersing players in a physical space or revealing truths about the logic of Woomera and detainee strategy, and more in crafting insight into the enacted subjectivity of Woomera refugees, read through the player's embodied gameplay experience." Although using game-mechanics of a typical adventure game "Escape from Woomera" was criticised as being too didactic as it imposes the designer's opinion of what to think about life as a refugee in Australia. There has been a huge increase in the number of games dealing with human right issues within the last ten years. Today there are hundreds of digital serious games which focus on topics like poverty, discriminations, refugees, gender issues, or child labor. These games – most of them having been supported or funded by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – can be divided according to their aims: (1) to inform players about certain problems or human right violations and (2) to raise awareness or criticize certain situations and motivate activity on the part of players. Most of the

time games provide a mixture of these aims. Like commercial games, these digital games use a variety of game-design strategies to deal with human rights. Some of the games are not oriented towards any particularly fun experiences. This might cause players to quit the game without ever turning to it again. Green (2014: 39) writes that “these types of games have earned the pejorative nickname ‘chocolate covered broccoli’ in that they are little more than basic and boring drills dressed up in a thin video game shell”. Fun, therefore, has to be regarded as a key-element of even serious games. However, one has to bear in mind that fun can be seen in different ways (Lazzaro, 2015). Serious fun, for example, refers to purposeful play in which players would like to make a difference in their real world. Making a serious game fun to play can be difficult for designers as “increasing system realism allows you to communicate a deeper message but typically makes for a less accessible, less fun play experience and thus less people will want to play the game” (Swain, 2007, p. 808). Apart from fun, other important factors in games include being very emotional or games using the concept of satire. Video-games can also be regarded as useful tools for fundraising and creating awareness (Stokes, Seggerman, & Rejeski, 2011).

You can now find numerous games in the field of human rights and human rights education. Most of them aim at showing human rights violations by putting the player in the shoes of a character whose rights are violated or by having the player take on the role of a helper. Topics of these serious games range from situation of refugees in different countries, politics over poverty and child labour and exploitation to equal opportunities. Although the games deal with similar topics and all of them try to teach players more or less about human rights there are huge differences regarding design.

Ayiti – The Cost of Life (Global Kids & Game Lab, 2006) was designed with the help of high school students to teach primary school children in industrialized countries the relationship between poverty and education. The simulation presents the player with the Guinnard family (parents and two children) who live in rural Haiti. The game principles are quite easy – the player has to decide who is going to work, who is allowed to attend school, and who should stay at home (and work at the family farm). Players can check on family members’ conditions including wellbeing, happiness, and education. Winning the game means that the family has to survive for 4 years (16 seasons). The game challenges typical Western beliefs

as sending all children to school ends the family in poverty, sickness, and death (Ferri & Fusaroli, 2009, p. 36). This way the game mechanics show the complex interaction between the need for education in order to get a better pay and a less dangerous job, but at the same time show that education in these countries is quite expensive. This means working hard (and risking one's health) sometimes is necessary. This vicious circle cannot be broken by simply telling people in less developed countries to send their children to school. What is quite remarkable about the game is that it comes with a lesson plan giving implementation suggestion for school use as well as background information about Haiti and the human right to education. The game is still used by many teachers around the world to teach about poverty in less developed countries.

Another game dealing with less developed countries is *Darfur is Dying* (Take Action Games, 2006) – a browser-based game about the crisis in Darfur. The game won the Darfur Digital Activist Contest sponsored by mtvU. It consists of two modes. In the first part, players choose a family member and are sent to forage for water. If the character is captured by a patrol of the Janjaweed militia, the player receives information of what would probably have happened to their character and is asked to select another family member. In the second mode, a refugee camp needs to be managed – the character has to use the water collected before for growing crops and has to build huts. When water runs out, the player returns to the first mode. In less than half a year after having been published, the game had been played by more than 800,000 people (Parkin, 2006).

After the first successful creations of games which aimed at making people aware of problems, game designers (and the organizations financing them) also came up with the idea of using games as means of fund-raising. *Free Rice* (United Nations World Food Programme [UNWFP], 2007) is basically a website providing multiple-choice quizzes for different subject areas (e.g., English, mathematics, foreign languages, geography). For every question the user answers correctly, 10 grains of rice are donated via the World Food Programme. In 2007 more than 12 billion rice grains were donated ('Totals | Freerice.com', 2015). As the website is constantly being updated, it still attracts many users. In the first 10 days of July 2015, nearly 60 million grains were collected by visitors answering questions. Players can sign up and keep track of their collected amounts of rice, as well as create and join groups. Meanwhile, there are more games working according to the motto feel good while

playing and donate to charities (Basu, 2010). There are games that even go one step further. *Half the Sky Movement: The Game* (Frima Studio, 2013) was co-produced by Zynga and the Games for Change movement as part of a transmedia project. The game is about the empowerment of women around the world and addresses various problems women have to face in today's society. The player starts out in India playing Radhika, who must decide if she should confront her husband about the necessity of getting medicine for their sick daughter. Decisions taken by the player that empower women are rewarded by the game. This game – as usual for games in social networks – encourages players to invite friends to play as well because sometimes support from other players is needed to complete a quest. To be able to play mini-games or travel within the game you need energy – which you can wait to be filled up after some time or you can buy energy using real money. Most of the money earned by in-app purchases is donated to charities. Additionally, there are some more incentives for players to come back and play the game. For example, when reaching a certain amount of points, books or medicine are donated, giving players the good feeling of being able to help by playing the game regularly. There was a huge media discussion when the game was launched, as the plot follows a book and a film dealing with the same topic (Holpuch, 2013; Wolonick, 2013). The game can be regarded as successful when it comes to the number of players and donations. By June 2015 the game had 1.3 million players, reported 250,000 book donations, and generated a total of more than US \$500,000 in overall donations ('Half The Sky Movement Game', 2015).

Apart from using social networks, recent games also make use of the latest hardware developments. *Outcasted* (Köln International School of Design, 2014) is a stand-alone first-person-simulation making use of Google's Oculus Rift to enable a completely new game experience. Players take the role of a homeless person living on the streets of a western city. The player's task is to draw passing pedestrians' attention to the playable character in order to receive money. The only action players can carry out is moving their heads to try and elicit eye-contact. Some of the passersby will start talking. Some will even give the character money. Still, more of them will ignore, insult, or even get aggressive towards the character. The developers of *Outcasted* intend to make people feel what it is like to depend on another people's goodwill.

As values can be integrated into digital games in various ways (cf. Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014), these games differ in great extent from each other regarding game design and how the topics and contents are realized (cf. Gabriel, 2016). The following sections will introduce the research carried out regarding games dealing with human right topics and show how the SGDA Framework can be used to find out if the game might be helpful for teaching about human rights.

Methodology

To find out about the potential of serious games, it is necessary to have a closer look at the underlying game design. For this research the Serious Game Design Assessment Framework (SGDA Framework) by Mitgutsch & Alvarado (2012) was used. This approach analyzes “a game’s formal conceptual design, its elements, and their relation to each other based on the game’s purpose” (ibid p. 121) and therefore helps to assess its possible impact. The SGDA Framework consists of six core components and puts purpose in the center of them all as this should be reflected in all other elements. The other five components are content, fiction and narrative, mechanics, aesthetics and graphics and finally, framing. The SGDA Framework was chosen as it puts emphasis on purpose when evaluating serious games which matches the objectives of human rights education. As Mitgutsch & Alvarado (2012: 123) state, purpose is not only reflected in the objectives and topic of the game but also in the designer’s intentions as the latter wants to achieve an impact beyond game-play. The game-design influences if there might be a possible transfer of empathy or change of behavior from the game into reality.

Before some of the games were analyzed according to the SGDA Framework, an extensive web-research was carried out to identify those serious games that deal with topics of human rights (violations). The web-research used Google as search-engine, entering different keywords like “serious game”, “human rights”, “digital game”, “immigration”, “refugee”, “poverty” and so on in different combinations and in the languages German and English to find as many games as possible. Only those games were included in the list whose purpose could explicitly identified as wanting to convey a message focused on human rights (e.g. discrimination against certain groups, freedom of thought, right to education). Serious games that deal with human rights as a second theme were not included in the list.

Results of Web Research

The web research resulted in a list of serious games on various human rights topics. As can be seen from table 1, an emphasis on certain topics can be found. The most prominent topic is poverty which, however can basically be subdivided into poverty in developing countries showing players what it means if there is not enough food, housing etc. available because of (civil) war or natural disasters. Another subgroup deals with factors that might lead to poverty in the so-called rich countries showing players for example that certain people do not earn enough money for paying the costs of daily life. Finally, the third sub-group features homeless people in European or US-American countries picturing the challenges and obstacles these people have to overcome in their daily struggle to survive.

Many games also deal with topics around refugees, asylum seekers and migration – especially those which were published within the last five years due to the topic being present in media and also affecting many people's lives. These games partly deal with legal migration to another country and the game characters facing various challenges to get settled in their new surroundings. A second group pictures people having been forced to leave their home countries and their risky journey into safety.

Generally, most of the games listed aim at creating empathy for the depicted groups by putting players in the shoes of asylum seekers, refugees, poor or homeless people. However, some of them use a more humorous way to make people aware of the topic (as for example Smuggle Truck or Penner Game).

Table 1. Overview of serious games dealing with human rights

Title of the game	Topic
3 rd World Farmer	Poverty (developing country)
A Breathtaking Journey	Refugees
A Closed World	LGBT
Against All Odds	Refugees
Antiwargame	Terrorism
Ayiti – The Cost of Life	Poverty (developing country)
Bad Paper – The Debtor Game	Poverty (Western world)
Bury Me, My Love	Refugees
Cartlife	Poverty (Western world)

Title of the game	Topic
Coming Out Simulator	LGBT
Cool School: Were Peace Rules!	Conflicts
Darfur is Dying	Refugees
Das kostet die Welt	Landgrabbing
Durch die Wild Web Woods	Basics of human rights
Eliminate Child Labour	Child labour
Endgame Syria	Conflicts
Escape from Woomera	Refugees
Execution	Death penalty
Finding Home	Refugees
Food Force	Hunger
FreeRice	Poverty
Frontiers	Refugees
Garbage Dreams	Poverty (developing countries)
GetH2O	Water shortage
Global Conflicts Palestine	Conflicts
Go Goat Go	Poverty (developing countries)
Half the Sky	Gender discrimination
Hobson's Choice	Poverty, homeless people
Home Behind	Refugees, civil war,
Homeland Guantamos	Refugees
Hush	Conflicts
ICED – I Can End Deportation	Refugees
Inside the Haiti Earthquake	Natural disasters
Layoff	Discrimination
Lim	Violence
Live58	Developing countries
Mainichi	Transgender
Maria Sister's: Clean Room	Immigration
Marketplace Poverty Simulator	Poverty (Western world)
Mars Generation One: Argubot Academy	Ethical decision taking

Title of the game	Topic
Mission	Poverty, homeless people
Mission 4: City of Immigrants	Immigration
No Game!	Poverty
On the Ground Reporter: Darfur	Conflicts
One Hen	Developing countries
Outcasted	Poverty, homeless people
Papers, Please	Totalitarian regime
Parable of the Polygons	(Ethical) decision taking
Parable of the Polygons	Ethical decision taking
Peacemaker	Conflicts
Penner Game	Poverty, homeless people
Penner Game 2 %	Poverty, homeless people
People Power – The Game of Civil Resistance	Civil rights
Phone Story	Exploitation
PING – Poverty is not a Game	Poverty (Western world)
Quandary	Ethical decision taking
Refugee	Refugees
September 12 th : A Toy World	Terrorism
Sim Sweatshop	Exploitation, Child Labour
Smuggle Truck	Refugees
Spent	Poverty (Western world)
Survival	Refugees
Sweatshop	Exploitation, child labour
Syrian Journey	Conflicts
The Invisible Hand	Fair trade
The Migrant Trail	Refugees
The Unfair Factory	Exploitation
This War of Mine	War
Ulitsa Dimitrova	Poverty, homeless people
Unstoppables	Discrimination
Wildfire	Poverty, gender discrimination, education

Analysis of *Bury Me, My Love*

Bury Me, My Love (Playdius 2017) is a smartphone app for iOS and Android that tells the story of a young woman called Nour who flees Syria and attempts to reach Europe in safety. The app is an interactive story told via a communication tool similar to WhatsApp. The player takes on the role of Majd who stays behind and can only occasionally text with his wife, send/receive photographs or emojis while she is on her dangerous journey. So, the player can provide Nour only with advice and support being able to influence her decisions and moves to a certain extent. Florent Maurin (2017:1), the designer of *Bury Me, My Love*, calls the game “a reality-inspired game, a fiction directly derived from real events [...]”. It is based on an article Maurin read in 2016 and on the actual experiences by a refugee from Syria who went on basically the same journey Nour has to undertake within the game. The title refers to an Arabic farewell meaning “Take care”.

Purpose

The topic of the game is to show players the reasons why people leave Syria and which hardships they have to endure when these people try to flee to a safe country. The designers of the game state their purpose as following:

“Our two main characters, Nour and Majd, are fictional. They do not exist, or rather, they exist collectively. They are a multitude of men, women and children: Dana, her mother, her brother-in-law... as well as thousands of others who flee their country – or watch their relatives flee – all in hopes of finding a better life in Europe. This story is about those who achieve that goal. It is about those who don’t. It is about those who die trying. It is about the world around us. Something which we hope will lead you to keep pondering on after it is over.” (‘Bury me, my Love – A Story of Love, Hope and Migration’, n.d.)

The game provides 19 different endings, thus ensuring that the decisions taken by the players really matter.

Content and Information

As the game relies on accounts by someone having fled from Syria, the information presented within the game is realistic and true. *Bury Me, My Love* is mostly

based on text, which means there are many data and facts used. However, the information is presented along the way, integrated in the story and relies on facts as well as personal experience by people interviewed for the game. However, to make the conversation between Nour and Majd more natural and realistic, prejudices and judgmental expressions are used as well. Apart from the text, the game provides a map from which the player can see the places Nour has already traveled to as well as some information about the historical or geographical importance of the place and relevant information regarding Syrian refugees. For example when clicking on Beirut within the map, you get the following information: "As of March 2016, there were over 305000 Syrian refugees officially registered in Beirut. They accounted for 16% of the city's population." The app tracks the progress and the journey using the map as a diary and thus changes from game to game depending on the decisions taken by the player.

Game Mechanics

As per Sicart (2008: 6) game mechanics is defined "as methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state" which subsumes the establishment of the rules but also the in-game goal of the game, the operation of the reward system, obstacles/challenges within the game, the difficulty balancing and the win conditions (Mitgutsch & Alvarado, 2012). The goal in *Bury Me, My Love* is to take decisions which enable the non-playable character Nour to arrive Europe safely. The players can only choose between a limited choice of answers or dialogue-parts, sometimes even choose between two different emoticons to send and thus cannot foresee how the decision will influence the story (or if Nour will even follow the piece of advice given by the player). The only feedback the player gets is the advancement Nour makes or the difficulties she has to face as a result of the decisions taken. There are no points or badges awarded, no levels. Advancement can only be seen from the map. However, there are some variables which will influence Nour's decisions and actions: her morale, her relationship level with Majd, her budget and the presence or absence of specific objects in her inventory.

Fiction and Narrative

The fictional context and the fictional world created is crucial for *Bury Me, My Love*. The whole story unfolds right from the beginning just by conversations between Nour and her husband. As the game advances, the player learns more and more

about the circumstances and reasons why only Nour sets out on the dangerous journey and what the couple experienced in their past. The player takes on the role of the husband, staying behind with his mother in a war-torn country, being unable to help his wife on the journey apart from giving support and advice. The game also enables players to choose the game's speed. If the "pseudo-real time" mode is switched on, the player needs to wait for the story to progress when Nour either does not have any network connection or needs to do something else. The game screen says "Nour is busy". When she needs to talk to the player, a notification is sent. As the player takes on the role of Majd, it helps perspective-taking which "is the active consideration of an outgroup member's mental state, points of view, and motivation" (Darvasi, 2016: 7).

Aesthetics and Graphics

These elements refer to the audiovisual language of the game and thus "define the overall formal aspects that frame the content (information), the fiction (the world and characters of the game), the framing (target group), the setting, and the mechanics (instructions, rewards)" (Mitgutsch & Alvarado, 2012: 126) The game uses a cartoonish style for depicting the characters (photographs and selfies sent in the game or the profile picture of Nour). The main game screen looks like a typical smartphone messenger app, showing Nour's messages in white font on a brown background and Majd's texts in black font on a white background. All conversations can be read up any time in the game. On the start of each day within the game, the date (day and month) is given. Sounds used are also similar to those of a smartphone messenger app. The map used to show important points in Nour's journey is similar to maps found on the internet (f.ex. Google maps). Although the characters are depicted with drawings, these are so detailed and natural, so that players get a feeling who Nour is. Aesthetics and graphics match the story and the framing without any contradiction.

Framing

The last aspect of the SGDA Framework deals with the framing of all the before mentioned elements in relation to the target group as well as their play literacy and the broader topic of the game. The game does not address a certain target group – basically anyone being interested in the game's topic should be able to play it. The game controls and the user interface are easy to use – there is not

much the player can do anyway. Most of the time the player's task is reduced to reading as not all of Majd's messages can be influenced. So, players need to be able to read quite well in order to follow the unfolding story. The topic of the story – Syrian refugees and their dangerous journey to Europe – is addressed in a rather emotional way and relies on the player's bonding with Nour and wishing her to arrive safely in Germany (which is the target destination). There are no additional educational resources provided – showing that the game was not directly meant to be used in classrooms. As the app provides 19 different endings and a lot of different conversations depending on the choices taken before, there is a high degree of replayability.

Conclusion

As it is stated in the SGDA Framework, the game's purpose needs to be reflected in the individual elements to present a coherent and cohesive game system. When having a look at the relation between the game's content, its fictional context and the mechanics, the following can be stated: The purpose of the game is to show players which obstacles and dangers Syrian refugees have to overcome in order to live a life in safety. The play wants to create understanding and empathy by showing how difficult this goal is to achieve. By telling about the lives of refugees and those left behind in a very personal way, the game succeeds in providing information and facts without leaving the narration. The game's disadvantage of leaving the players rather passive and not allowing them many choices (as only pre-formulated answers can be chosen from time to time) is at the same time mirroring the actual impossibility of influencing a beloved person's fate because of only being connected by a smartphone. Thus, the game shows how important this device becomes for refugees as it is often the only connection to their family and friends. Of course, if the game can really evoke empathy with the players, cannot be answered by having a look at the game elements. However, this analysis shows that a game like *Bury Me, My Love* has a great potential to influence players and address the objectives of human rights education in the before-mentioned category of learning by human rights.

As shown in this paper, many serious games address topics that cover human rights education. Many of them like the example of *Bury Me, My Love* discussed, try to evoke empathy with the player. Not all these games reach this aim. This is

specially the case when the purpose of the game is not reflected in the other elements as stated in the SGDA Framework. However, to make sure that players really learn something from the game, guided reflection and discussion of the game content might be needed additionally.

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