

Introduction to the Games for Impact Minitrack

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In play there is something “at play” which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something.

– J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

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1. Games For Impact

Sustainable Development Goals of United Nations invite action from all levels of the society to help solving the problems of the world together. Toward these goals, games can offer potential solutions with their ability to mimic, contain, or sample real or plausible scenarios and systems in a readily accessible simulation. They are inherently player centric; therefore, player’s perspective and involvement for the intended experience derives the success of a game. From this central role of the player comes the power of games to educate, rehabilitate, recreate and rejoice with entertainment.

Videogames have become a central media that is not only a creative outlet for software technology but also a propelling force for some technical advancements from software technology and user experience to visualisation and computing hardware. Especially with the latest development of game development frameworks and an ability to incorporate them into various workflows such as film and visualisation, game technology has become more accessible to diverse implementation domains. This opened the door not only for utilising games technology beyond entertainment but also for the development of digital games with diverse agenda and goals including but not limited to healthcare research, education, social and political commentary and social innovation.

Intentional or not, each game has a transformational power—small or big. While it may be hard to contemplate on the transformational qualities of *Candy Crush* (King, 2012) or *Merge Mansion* (Metacore, 2020), mobile games with simple monetary objectives and repetitive tasks, it can be argued that one may improve their attention skills with *Candy Crush* or practice their working memory with a game like *Merge Mansion* despite a lack of notable research yet-to-support this argument. Besides, either of these games or many other from among similar games that are easy to access and simple to learn may brighten somebody’s day while they are going through a life crisis such as caring for a loved one in the hospital or dealing with some unexpectedly difficult news. In the face of a challenging experience, everyone has their own unique coping mechanisms, and they come in many forms; playing a game is just one of those.

Play is an inherently instinctual activity, and that birds play as much as cubs or humans do. Playing and learning is so intertwined that there has been a growing recognition of the potential of games to influence attitudes, behaviours, and decision-making (Schreiner, 2008; Tece Bayrak, 2019). The ability of games to represent complex systems in an accessible context makes them a strong candidate for various research agendas that are tied to complex system dynamics (Tece Bayrak, 2019). Even though these games are sometimes referred as serious games due to their serious intentions, many of them deliver these design goals without a direct disposition, and perhaps the strength of influence is hidden in a subtlety. Therefore, it may be hard to categorise them as serious games.

Earlier works of transformative games include *September 12*¹ (Frasca, 2003), which carried an intention to create a debate about war against terrorism, and *Peacemaker*² (ImpactGames, 2007), which is a government simulation game aiming to

¹ <https://www.onseriousgames.com/september-12th-a-toy-world-newsgame/>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PeaceMaker>

educate on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Their intent was rooted in the notion of awareness with exposure where these games essentially drew attention to social, cultural or political issues to inform and shake the public opinion. An example of unintentional impact that originates from games that may not have intended it in the first place is Minecraft, which later became a strong tool in education and a tool for raising awareness for environmental matters through building, creation and play. The creation of the Białowieża Forest in Minecraft is a good example for this, where the intent was raising awareness for the forest and the impact of excessive logging; “the Białowieża Forest is one of the last remaining primeval forests in Europe”³.

While there has been notable but scattered research in the area of games for change since early 2000s, there is a need for an established field of research on exploring how games and games technology can be utilised effectively for social good (Tece Bayrak, 2019). This research field can be considered as a movement and referred as Games for Impact following suit from the initial Games for Change organisation⁴. Game design is systemic, affirmative, critical, and speculative (Tece Bayrak, 2019); while its product is playful by nature, the process of game making and the experience of taking part in play present an opportunity to view and explore challenging or radical topics, value building, social/cultural/political inquiry, or empathy as an unusual way of investigating how the world is or what the world can become. In relation to this, the use of software technology to achieve these goals and understanding the notions of systemic design that can offer user experiences serving for these goals, and explorations to uncover yet-to-be found strategies in developing games or utilizing game technology for these goals are important facilitators of this research field.

Games ecosystem is diverse and its scope is expanding with a wider use of games across diverse demographics, for diverse purposes, and with diverse technology. Therefore, this minitrack, positioned within Software Technology track is very timely and forward-looking.

The HICSS 58 minitrack on “Games for Impact” intends to draw attention to the use of games and game technology for special purposes and social good where the created experience reaches beyond entertainment. Recognising that games are a powerful vehicle to make emerging technologies accessible to society, this mini track creates a space to explore the many factors that influence the design, development, application,

adoption, use, and impact of games and game technology.

In this very first Games for Impact minitrack, we are excited to present you three insightful papers that highlight the diverse plateau of research in this space and are exemplar for the profound impact that games may have on our society.

The first paper, *The Transformative Experience of Game Jams: How Game Making Improved Perceived Social Issue Understanding*, presents a discussion on the influence of game making on an understanding of social issues and how game jams can be events of personal development.

The second paper, *Exploring the Transformative Nature of Games via a Project Based Classroom with Games for Impact*, reports from a university level educational context and presents a classroom practice that encourages making games beyond entertainment as a means to develop an understanding for many mechanisms of game making in relation to the influence of the game as a product.

The final paper, *Database of Games for Evoking Emotions in Research (GEER)*, explores the diverse emotions elicited during gameplay. The paper reports on an intention to build a database that links specific games to specific target emotional responses towards understanding the relationship between technology and emotional stimuli.

2. References

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³ <https://geoboxers.com/bialowieza/>

⁴ Gamesforchange.org