Urge - Why Make a Game?

So you want to make a game? Congratulations and welcome. You’ve just joined a growing community of social change, educational, and cultural institutions who see the potential of digital games to engage people and inspire change in thought and action. Games can be an asset in your media tool kit—supplementing websites, print collateral, promotional efforts, rallies, conferences, documentaries, and any other methods you use to inform, persuade, and energize the public.

Before You Begin

Creating a successful game for change is an ambitious goal, and you’re entering relatively uncharted waters. We created the Toolkit and these guides to help you map out the journey from here to there. This is not an expert, step-by-step manual. In fact, you’ll probably hire or partner with game designers and producers to collaborate in the creation of your game.

We will, however, provide an overview of the process and what each phase entails—specifically, what questions you need to answer, what decisions you need to make, and enough supporting information to take a step forward and start the conversation.

Before you begin, there are three important questions you must answer. Answering these questions channels the inspiration and energy of your Urge into concrete action. Your answers will help you make hundreds of decisions throughout the process of making your game:

- What are your goals?
- Who is your target audience?
- What resources can you allocate?

In addition, you should play as many games as possible, starting now. Just as you would never make a film without watching films, you need the insight and understanding that only direct experience provides. Play with your kids. Play with your parents. Find someone who knows a lot about games and play with them. Play the games for change on our website, play console games, play any game you can find. Read some game reviews and check our online News feed, which aggregates blogs about the latest releases.

Examples

An especially illuminating set of games to look at are past winners of the Games for Change Awards (GaChas.) This biannual award series was launched at the 2007 Games for Change festival, to help shape the field of social issue games going forward as well as recognize the best examples. After much consultation with advisors, we created three major categories of social issue games. These three categories delineate ways we think games for change are effective:

Best Awareness-Raising Game

Awarded to the game that best raises awareness of an important social issue through engaging and meaningful gameplay coupled with innovative and successful distribution techniques towards a broad reach. These are often low budget games, made in a grass roots context, virally distributed.
Best Transformation Game
Awarded to the best game which engages players on a deep and meaningful level around an important social issue, whose aims and outcomes are no less than to foster a powerful intellectual or behavioral transformation in its users. These are often bigger budget games aimed at deeper learning or change of worldview.

Best Social Commentary/Art Game
Awarded to the best game making a statement or provoking new thinking about an important social issue. These games aim to bring to life a new truth about an issue, provoke thought, or reveal an artist or commentator view.

Check out some of the winners and staff picks on our site of especial interest to beginners: AYITI: The Cost of Life (www.gamelab.com/game/ayiti); Peacemaker (www.peacemakergame.com); Real Lives (www.educationalsimulations.com/downloads.html); The Redistricting Game (www.redistrictinggame.org); Oligarchy (www.molleindustria.org/en/oligarchy) and Food Force (www.food-force.com).

Your Goals
Your desire to make a game is the Urge, the important first step. Even more important is exploring, understanding and articulating why. Most social change organizations see games as a way to raise awareness, to engage people at a deeper level in thinking and learning about an issue, and to inspire people to take some kind of action.

Raise Awareness
Games are growing up. According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), 35% of homes have a videogame console, and 65% of the American population plays digital games of one kind or another. Generally speaking, digital games are now a mainstream American leisure activity.

Gamers are not all teenage boys—the average gamer is 35 years old, and has been playing for 13 or more years. Forty percent of gamers are women. PC gamers are a little older, console gamers a bit younger, and the casual game market is both older and predominantly female.

Expand Your Audience
Games can also help expand your reach to different demographics. Many people will play a game—even one with a social issue at its core—who would not otherwise consider a particular social problem. Games engage people other media won't. They are often a way to reach a particular audience on their own turf, especially (but not always) young people.

Big-budget, best-selling videogames can reach audiences in the tens of millions. Fortunately, very modest games can also attract large audiences. On websites offering free Flash games, like Addicting Games and Kongregate, a hit game can attract millions of players. Some of the games featured on our website have been played by millions of people on a variety of sites.

Publicize Your Message
Publicity drives users to try a game, thereby exposing them to its message. In addition, a newsworthy or compelling story around a game can serve your goal, even if the game itself has limited appeal to gamers. Games like Peacemaker (www.peacemakergame.com) and ICED (I Can End Deportation)
Engage People at a Deeper Level
Games are different from other forms of media. While these differences can be daunting to those exploring the field for the first time, they also offer unique benefits.

Games Are Sticky
Few people read an article or watch a video more than once. Because games are interactive and variable in outcome, however, people will play them over and over. Even a light game with limited playability often gains people’s attention for a much longer duration than many other media. Gaming websites report that users spend far longer on their sites than the Internet average.

From an advertising perspective, the longer a user engages with your brand, the greater impact it has. Games often engage users longer than other forms of advertising. Substituting “issue” for “brand” underscores a game’s potential to have a real impact on users.

Games Are Systems
We’re used to engaging issues in terms of facts, arguments, and talking points. Most issue-oriented media aims to tackle problems with this approach. Games are different. Games are systems. In Rules of Play (www.books.google.com/books?id=UM-xycrZuQC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Rules+of+Play&ei=OosQSYPqCJbKMJi0IlIh), Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman offer a clear definition: “A system is a set of things that affect one another within an environment to form a larger pattern that is different than any of the individual parts.”

The real world—and real-world issues—consists of systems. The environment is a system. Cities are systems. International politics is a system. Human experience is, at its core, a complex, interactive, interrelated set of actors best represented not by a list of simplistic talking points, but as a dynamic system. By promising a more authentic experience, games present a more complex challenge but with potential for greater reward.

Games Are Persuasive
How do you codify your message in the context of a system? Fortunately, games can make arguments. They can inform and persuade as well as entertain—in short, they possess the power of rhetoric. Game designer Ian Bogost describes the power of “procedural rhetoric”—games’ ability to persuade players through rule-based representations and interactions. Videogame persuasion has already taken form and shows considerable potential in politics, advertising, and education.

It’s important to be clear at the outset whether you want to allow your players to explore different perspectives or convince them of a particular viewpoint. Peacemaker, for example, takes the former approach by allowing players to play either side, with authentic, balanced actions and outcomes. ICED (I Can End Deportation) aims to persuade players using content and mechanics with a strong bias toward the injustice of deportation.
Promote Learning (and Action)

Fundamentally, games can support and encourage learning—this is well documented—and learning is the first step toward any kind of change in thought or behavior. Why are games good for learning?

- Games are interactive—they give people agency and the ability to affect outcomes
- Games empower people to try on new worlds and new perspectives
- Games encourage people to explore issues through systems with multiple variables
- Games allow people to fail in safe ways
- Games are good for tailoring experiences to an individual’s level

Games can help players gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of an issue by exploring the motivations and problems of the actors involved. Taking actions and feeling consequences provides a richer experience than perhaps any other medium. Active discovery is more effective than passive listening; research shows that students learn best by doing, rather than by simply listening or reading.

Building authentic details and constraints into the system helps move people to think and even act differently around an issue. And because games are “sticky,” players willingly engage with them for long periods of time, exploring intricacies of a problem in a way they might not be able to in a documentary, news article, or book.

Ayiti: The Cost of Life is a fine example here. After playing, you come away with a more nuanced feeling of the intractability of Third World poverty, a visceral sense of the desperate struggle people face as they try to lift themselves out of it, and greater empathy for their problems. Typical media appeals on this issue tug on donors' heartstrings but in so doing cast the poor as helpless victims rather than fully realized human beings with their own agency. By placing you in the role of a child or parent in a Third World family, Ayiti instead makes you understand that they are far from helpless, but subject to enormously difficult circumstances which financial aid can in part address. Ayiti reveals the systems of the real world.

Resources

Once you’ve made up your mind to make a game, make sure you can allocate some resources to it, at least for the next phase, which is developing a concept. Start a conversation with your well-established funders. As Suzanne Seggerman discusses in the “Approaching Funders” section of the accompanying video, it’s important to bring them along in the process as early as possible. Consider available resources, research new funding sources, and start establishing scope and budget. What are your financial goals? How much might you spend on production, development, marketing, and distribution? What returns, if any, might you expect?
It’s also important to acknowledge and consider the many good reasons why not to create a game: perhaps the potential audience is irrelevant to your goals, perhaps your issue is not easily treated in a game context, or perhaps your resources would be better spent in other realms.

**Conclusion**

Games can be a compelling and effective way to achieve your organization’s goals. They can reach a wider audience to raise awareness and engage people at a deeper level of thinking, learning and action. Before you start engaging with potential funding sources, partners, or contractors—that is, at the earliest stages—you should answer these questions:

- What are your goals? What specific impact(s) do you want your game to have?
- Who is your intended audience?
- What games, if any, do they play?
- What aspects of the issues you address—problems, actors, and real-world systems—lend themselves to exploration in a game?
- What resources can you allocate to creating a game, and what funding sources are available?