
71.

River of Justice

Conflict Resolution in a Complex World

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Short Game Description

River of Justice is a 3D immersive game exploring the complexities of global conflict, ethical decision-making, and tensions between justice and forgiveness. Players take on the virtual role of an international agency representative in a fictionalized version of Uganda during the violent reign of the Lord's Resistance Army. Suddenly finding themselves swept into the conflict, players are faced with ethical dilemmas that have both local and far-reaching consequences.

Introduction

While games have emerged as potentially powerful spaces of deep engagement and transformational play, a key challenge faced by the “serious games” community is how to leverage these experiences to cultivate positive change in the player beyond the game experience itself. Although we recognize games as ideological worlds that potentially offer powerful experiences (Squire, 2006), our current theory of change seeks to go beyond “bounded” game experiences and the fictional narratives they represent, offering more service-based engagement systems that invite and empower players to realize new possibilities both within the game and in their lives. Thus, part of our design process involves developing a supportive infrastructure *around* the bounded game context that would enable players, educators, and community advocates interested in engaging with complex issues of justice and forgiveness within their own lives and local contexts (Gee & Hayes, 2011). In other words, rather than simply having a transformative experience within the game world (Barab et al, 2010), our current focus is to take the core in-game tension around how one responds to injustice and support players in transforming their relationship to their personal history with our broad ideological commitment being to reduce resentment and increase the amount of forgiveness in our world.

River of Justice, a 3D immersive game set during the violent reign of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, represents one of our recent efforts to shift this emphasis of focus. The original intent of this experience was to engage players in the complexities of global conflict, ethical decision-making, and tensions between justice and forgiveness, within the context of a particular conflict (Barab et al, 2011). However, given the shift in our focus away from “bounded product” and toward service-based impact, three core design aspirations became the emphasis of our current approach:

- How to blur the “magic circle” (Huizinga, 1955), such that more direct connections could be

drawn between the in-game and real-world experience of the players;

- How to leverage conversations around the game in the service of deeper engagement; and
- How to build external resources that help extend the implicit understandings embodied in the game experience.

Given the limitations of scope of this submission, the focus of this discussion is on the designed features of the game experience, with the understanding that showcase conversations would jointly emphasize “within-game” and “beyond-game” design aspirations.

Background

River of Justice is set in the nation of Bunala, a fictional analogue of a historical Uganda during an era of violence and atrocity perpetrated by the Lord’s Resistance Army, an anti-governmental military force. Over a 20-year period, the violence committed by the LRA resulted in the death and displacement of millions, while leaving countless others mutilated, raped, or enslaved as child soldiers (Eichstaedt, 2009). Players take on the virtual role of a field representative for an international agency tasked with exploring villages and engaging the perspectives of local Bunalans, before making a final recommendation about the most appropriate way to address the LRM (a fictionalized LRA) conflict. Soon after arriving, however, players find themselves swept into the conflict themselves, and are faced with ethical dilemmas that have both immediate and far-reaching consequences. While the notion of setting a game within the context of a recent period of conflict rife with atrocity and human tragedy presents its own challenges, we reasoned that such a design would allow players to more directly face the atrocities and inhumane conditions that we, as people, have inflicted on one another in our darkest times (Barab et al., 2011). By illuminating the complexities of the nature of peace and justice, we invite players, educators, and other stakeholders to engage with the moral complexity of our modern world.

Central Aims

At one level, an aim of the experience is to deepen player understandings of the ethical and moral complexities of conflict resolution in both global and locally-relevant contexts, while positioning such dilemmas in a personally-relevant way. At a deeper level, the experience addresses the issue of how players deal with moments in their own lives in which they feel they have been treated unjustly. At a level beyond the in game-experience or even player reflection, we seek to inspire, support, and sustain conversations between players, educators, and community advocates interested in engaging with, or even transforming notions of justice, peace, and forgiveness in their everyday contexts.

Approach to Learning

Within the bounded game context, *River of Justice* employs a 3D immersive narrative structure, which players navigate the virtual world of Bunala using an in-game avatar, make choices through in-game dialogues with non-player characters (NPCs), and collect, assemble, or distribute in-game objects that further progress the story. Game play also includes a set of meters (one of which is locked until a certain point in the game) which grow based on how the player’s in-game choices reflect advocacy toward

justice, amnesty, or other outcomes to the LRM conflict. The player's actions toward these ends impact other events and interactions in the story, including story outcomes. The objective of the player is to recommend a decision to the fictional ICC, with the in-game boss judging the alignment between the recommendation and particular game play interactions and choices. Beyond offering a simulation of the conditions and struggles, which might draw upon factual data to inform the outcomes of a user's actions, we situate the player as decision-maker immersed in the conflict itself, tangled in a mesh of unforeseen possibilities, difficult choices, and unintended consequences.

Consistent with our beyond-game impact aspirations, we sought to design in-game dialogue and interactions that aimed to blur the "magic circle" between in-game experience and the player's real-world identity (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). While conversations with NPCs generally focused on in-game occurrences, several encounters asked players for their views on real-world issues such as capital punishment, which would then impact events in the game world. Additionally, research implementations centered on the game also focused on leveraging conversations between pairs of players around the game through questions designed not only as "data gathering" tools, but also prompts for eliciting further player reflection on core issues. Finally, we have established a network of impact-focused services, including discussion guides, curricular integrations, and digital learning platforms that invite stakeholders to engage in partnerships to adapt our designs for their purposes and realize the real-world outcomes they envision for the communities they serve. The *River of Justice* project is meant to illustrate just some of the potential of these game-enabled opportunities for real-world change.

References

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Acknowledgments

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