
SERIOUS GAMES AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction and Background

This paper examines the potential role of electronic games and 3D visualisations applied to sustainable community development. Serious Games is the use of games technologies and methodologies for primarily non-entertainment purposes and embraces applications such as e-learning, simulations and immersive virtual environments such as Second life.

Serious Games is a significant emerging application of converging technologies and connects our physical environment with networked virtual environments to provide a range of solutions to some of the challenges of globalisation.

Games and Development

Throughout history, games have always played a vital part in human (and animal) development. From the day we are born we engage in gameplay as a safe and engaging environment for learning about the world around us. Games allow us the freedom to explore and experiment and in the process to develop our skills and learn to interact with others. Games teach us how to compete, to stretch our capabilities and to collaborate with each other in team games.

Games engage us and immerse us in activities which influence our lives and shape our opinions. Electronic games, as witnessed by their popularity across a broad social and age spectrum, simply provide a different medium to achieve the same results.

The Attention Economy

Globalisation presents business and society with many issues, not least the challenge of engaging and retaining attention. The Networked society is in many ways a paradox because the increase in connectivity brings with it a dilution of community cohesion and a breakdown in the various relationships which make up society.

This instability is caused by disruptive technologies which change established social and economic orders and quantum leaps in communications technologies from the earliest times in human development have been responsible for the rise and fall of empires and superpowers.

Addressing the issues of the attention economy and the breakdown in social and economic relationships requires solutions which re-capture our attention and seriously engage us once more in understanding the new world around us and providing us with a safe environment to function within and shape our futures. Serious Games have many of the positive characteristics required to provide this safe environment.

3D Visualisation and Mixed Reality

Many of today's most successful electronic games use immersive and persistent 3D virtual environments. Although not strictly games, virtual worlds such as Second Life are proving hugely successful as social and economic networks which provide opportunities for entrepreneurial spirits to fulfil their potential in a new social and economic structure largely unconstrained by existing social and economic structures and open to everyone who has access to the technology.

Whilst there are many positive aspects to the opportunities these environments create, these applications are still embryonic and disconnected from physical, geographical communities. Digital earth and visualisation technologies, when exposed to open source and web 2.0 philosophies can build some important bridges between physical and virtual communities and re-introduce into social and economic development the important notion of place and a sense of identity.

Location Based Games

A natural subset of serious games is "Location Based Games" which use location tracking services such as GPS within gameplay and educational applications designed to strengthen networked relationships and build community identity.

This paper will illustrate some examples of location based games and how they seek to support community development.

Conclusion

Serious Games have a potentially important role to play in sustainable development by engaging communities, raising awareness of serious issues, shaping opinions, providing a safe environment to explore the future and developing our skills.

3D Visualisation and location based services can provide a technology framework which binds communities, re-establishes the importance of place and cultural identity, and encourages sustainable development.

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Biodata

David Wortley is Director of the Serious Games Institute at Coventry University. His commercial career has been spent in the converging technologies of telecommunications (British Telecom), computing (IBM), and digital media (Mass Mitec) with a focus on technology for competitive advantage, education and community informatics. He has spoken at many international conferences on the Information Society, Globalisation and the use of technology for sustainable social and economic development.

After setting up and running the New Technology Initiative Creative Industries Centre for Knowledge Exchange at De Montfort University for a year, David moved to the Serious Games Institute in November 2006.