

Poverty Is Not a Game (PING): Demonstration of a Serious Game about the Experience of Being Poor

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces and proposes to demonstrate Poverty Is Not a Game (PING), a serious game about the experience of being poor, initialized by IBBT-MICT, supported and managed by the King Baudouin Foundation and IBBT and developed by GriN Multimedia in close collaboration with a range of experts and partners.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8 [Personal Computing]: Games

General Terms

Design, Human Factors

Keywords

serious games, game design, social marketing, awareness-raising

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Commission has designated 2010 as the year for combating poverty and social exclusion. The European Anti-Poverty Network reports that at present 78 million people, about 16% of the European population, live on or below the poverty line. 19% of children in the EU live in poverty and 1 in 10 grow up in a family in which no one works.

One of the cornerstones of the European model of society is that everyone should be able to contribute to and enjoy the benefits of social and economic progress. The thematic year of 2010 should therefore mobilize European citizens and all relevant public, social and economic institutions.

In response to this call the King Baudouin Foundation in collaboration with the Interdisciplinary Institute for Broadband Technology (IBBT) took the initiative to start a project to raise awareness regarding the problem of poverty and social exclusion aimed at teenagers. Because this age group distinguishes itself by being the most avid gamers, it was decided to create a serious game about poverty and social exclusion that can be played in school or at home and that can serve as an introduction to and

brief experience of the problems poor and socially excluded people face.

2. WHY A SERIOUS GAME?

A “serious game” is often described as a computer application using game technology and game design principles, but of which the primary goal is not entertainment, but education, awareness-raising, political consciousness-raising, or physical or mental training.

The first reason for choosing the “serious game” format is that we would be able to reach out to young people in their own environment and in their own “language”. Over the years games have shifted from niche subculture to mainstream where they play an ever-increasing role in shaping the imagination and world picture of young people [1]. Games are part and parcel of youth culture, so much so that in terms of status they are sometimes compared to the rock ‘n’ roll of the 1960s. A serious game about poverty and the fight against poverty could introduce youngsters to an alternative application of the video game medium.

Moreover, games are a powerful medium for generating specific experiences. Whereas a (documentary) film or a written commentary can tell a story about another person, a game presents a role to be occupied by the player, who is then drawn directly into the action and watches events unfold from the front row [2]. This creates a degree of player involvement which is difficult to evoke using other media. Apart from that the video game is also a powerful format for representing systematically organized information [3]. The underlying computer technology and rule-based character make it possible for games to simulate complex systems based on a large number of variables. Financial difficulties and the ensuing poverty and exclusion in the real world are complex, systemic and dependent on a wide range of variables. A serious game has the ability to at least partially simulate the system behind these problems and thus allow the player to “look behind the scenes” of the problem, which is again an experience that is difficult to evoke in other media.

Finally, games can be powerful educational tools because of their intrinsically motivating character [3]. The ability to implement a reward structure within the game itself, e.g. in the form of points, progression through the game, added story elements, cut scenes etc., makes it possible to motivate the player within the game without necessarily providing external incentives, such as school reports or prizes. However it must also be noted that the video game medium is no panacea, through which the phenomenon of poverty and the fight against it can be represented perfectly. Due to their mechanical, competitive and artificial character, for example, games are only to a limited extent capable of conveying

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individual emotions, such as pain. In spite of this we believe that a serious game of good quality, on poverty and exclusion, could bridge a large gap in the communication on this subject.

3. REQUIREMENTS

Due to the specific scope and explorative nature of the project, attention needed to be paid to both user and technological requirements. Many teenagers may be avid gamers but not all of them are. And even those teenagers that do game, play different types of games with girls generally being oriented more towards 2D casual games and boys towards 3D action [5]. For this reason the interface needed to be as intuitive and easy to handle as possible. Although the game is in 3D, due to its point-and-click controls it is easy to manipulate. Because both girls and boys needed to be able to identify with the main character, two scenarios were created, one with a male and one with a female protagonist.

A second series of requirements derived from the fact that the game needed to be playable in a class context. This had consequences for its shape and length. First of all, classroom computers are not always equally powerful in terms of 3D acceleration so the hardware requirements needed to be kept to a minimum and its settings easily changeable. Second, the majority of school computers are not equipped with loudspeakers or headphones so it was decided to pay only limited attention to sound effects. Third and finally, there was an explicit demand for a game that could be played in one hour so, although there was more material available, we decided to limit the game's theoretical minimum length to some 45 minutes for each scenario.

Apart from the school context, we wished to make the game available as broadly as possible. One consequence of this is that the game needed to be geography-agnostic (it takes place in an unnamed European city) and that all material needed to be translatable into at least five languages (sound, dialogues and in-game assets) and be acceptable to teenagers from all European countries. Another consequence was that, as we wished to make it freely available online, it needed to be as easily portable as possible. For this reason and because of its rapid development tools, we picked Unity 3D middleware as a development platform which will allow us to release both for its browser plugin and standalone for several platforms, PC, Mac and possibly mobile.



Figure 1: Jim at the real estate agency

4. THE GAME

The game is a 3D adventure game containing two scenarios, one about Jim (figure 1), a boy who leaves his home after a row with his father to go live independently in the big city (situational poverty). He has to find a place to live but has difficulties paying the deposit. He finds a job but it is too heavy and he falls ill and loses it. The goal for the player is to help Jim resolve his problems so as to be able to lead a happy life.

Sophia (figure 2) comes from a poor family where she had to take care of her grandmother (generational poverty). When the latter moves to a home for the elderly, Sophia finds herself independent. She has to find a place to live, a job and will later have the opportunity to go back to school and finish her education. She might even meet a nice boy somewhere along the road.



Figure 2: Sophia talking to the social assistant

5. DEMONSTRATION

We propose to give a live demonstration at the Fun and Games Conference and deliver a playable version for the demo booth. Hardware requirements are low as the game runs on a standard PC or laptop. To play full screen with the graphics set to high, a computer with discrete graphics is recommended.

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