

Poverty is not a game: Behavioral changes and long term effects after playing PING

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Previous research (Neys & Jansz, 2010) has shown that playing political games provides players with a sense of being more knowledgeable about the topic dealt with in the game than they were before (i.e. *individual facilitation*). More importantly, however, players indicated that they felt the need to interact with their social environment, i.e. friends and peers, about the issue addressed in the game they played. This *social facilitation* attributes to the development of informal civic networks and arguably encourages people to participate and engage in civic society to a greater extent than before playing the game.

However, the aforementioned study investigated intentions of people rather than measuring actual behavioral changes. The aim of the current study therefore was to investigate if these intentions were translated into actual behavioral change.

Furthermore, the present study also enabled the further investigation of social facilitation especially for those who claim to be moderately interested in politics. We argue that it is the group that is moderately interested in politics that can possibly be persuaded to participate actively in political discussions (in the broadest sense of the word) if they are facilitated by 'tools' that concord with their personal context. Serious games are an excellent platform in this sense as they are an expressive medium (Bogost, 2007) that has the capacity to reveal complex situations in a relatively simple way. These games encourage reflection about what is going on in the world (Frasca, 2006) and consequently stimulate players to undertake action (e.g. inform oneself about the issue, discuss the issue with friends, and so on), i.e. individual and social facilitation.

Poverty Is Not a Game (PING) is a serious game that aims to discuss the subject of poverty and what it means to be poor. The game takes place in a three-dimensional world representing an average Western European city and through its game play intends to raise awareness concerning the mechanism underlying poverty (De Grove et al., 2011). When the game was launched in fall 2010 people who visited the website were invited to participate in this research. They were asked to play the game and afterwards fill out an online survey. Participants who had indicated to want to partake in the follow up study were approached to fill out a similar survey three months later.

Results (N=275) suggest that political participation changes over the course of three months. Following the European Social Survey we measured passive and active participation, where passive participation denotes being a member of political party or NGO, whereas active participation is defined

by for example taking part in a demonstration, boycotting certain products or signing a petition. After three months, passive participation scored significantly higher, whereas active participation scored significantly lower.

Furthermore, the results suggest that participants' intents to engage themselves in the issue of poverty scored significantly higher than their actual behavior ($t = 4,077$, $df = 268$, $p = 0.000$) concerning individual facilitation. In other words people stated they intended to inform themselves about poverty after playing, but when asked three months later they had not done this. Nor did they become involved with an action group dealing with the issue of poverty or contacted the creator of the game. Concerning social facilitation a different picture emerges. Participants indicated that they talked about poverty with friends more than they intended to just after playing the game for the first time. Surprisingly, however, the differences were not found to be significant ($t = -1,303$, $df = 268$, $p = 0,194$).

Concerning the issue of political interest results show that almost a third (31,3%) of those who indicated to be 'not interested' in politics after three months consider themselves to be 'interested' in politics. It is also for this group that social facilitation plays the largest role. Their actual behavior in terms of talking with friends about poverty was higher than any of the other groups. Furthermore, their participation levels, especially passive participation, have increased the most when compared to the other groups. These results indicate that playing a serious game is beneficial for most people in terms of political engagement, but mostly so for those people who are already somewhat interested in politics to begin with. Furthermore, social facilitation can be seen as a moderator for this group to facilitate their engagement to a next level.

References

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