Playful Politics: Developing a Framework for Designing Video Games for Political Participation in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Political participation in the United Kingdom among young voters (aged 18-24) has steadily declined over the past two decades. Alongside this decline, video game popularity has meteorically risen among the same demographic, resulting in video games becoming increasingly more integrated within modern society. While these instances are not necessarily related, there is opportunity to explore the use of video games' popularity to increase political participation.

The basis of this research is to investigate video games as a medium for social change, and its application within a political context in order to encourage political participation in the United Kingdom. The research intends to critically analyse existing video game design theories with implications of social impact, and provide existing examples of video game usage within political contexts.

This research has assisted in the development of the Political Design Framework, a design methodology that provides ethical definition and validation for video games that intend to promote political engagement.

Keywords

Political participation; young voters; serious games; game development; ethical design; play theory.

Introduction

The political system in the United Kingdom is currently struggling to connect with certain voting demographics. Alongside apathetic attitudes, only 44% of British citizens between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four voted in the 2010 General Election (Ipsos MORI, 2015). This is a particularly-alarming statistic, as the younger – and, therefore, future - voting generations exhibit more apathetic behaviours than any other demographic. This threatens the viability of the democratic process within the United Kingdom, which relies on strong voter participation and voter integration within the mainstream political sphere (Stoker, 1998, p. 19).

During this decline in political participation, an increase in popularity and cultural acceptance has been exhibited in the medium of video games. According to statistics from 2008, 94% of people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four identify themselves as "gamers" (Kay and Vovk, 2008). Coincidentally, this age demographic aligns with the demographic that are least engaged with current mainstream politics, and extends towards groups that are yet entitled to vote in the United Kingdom. While the rise in video game consumption does not necessarily correlate with voter turnout, they present an opportunity to become the solution to a depreciating rate of engagement within certain demographics.

The purpose of this research is to establish a design schema for video games aimed at integrating young voters into the United Kingdom political system. This research will formulate a deep understanding of the nature of video games and where a potential relationship between mainstream politics and video games can exist by considering existing theories and practice of video game applications in wider social contexts. This understanding will be supported through the analysis of the *Democracy* video game series (Positech Games, 2005; 2007; 2013), a contemporary video game with political content and educational applications. Reviewing current practice and theories will assist in developing a design framework for video game development with the intention of social integration and, in this particular case, political integration.

Contextual Review

It is important to firstly define and understand the political, social and cultural boundaries that shape the design of video games. The context of this research focuses on political issues that are impactful on wider society, in particular the diminishing voter turnout for General Elections in the United Kingdom. As is the case for video game design, "grappling with questions of culture and game design is therefore quite difficult. Whenever you consider the cultural aspects of a game, you need to define exactly what you consider culture to be" (Salen and Zimmerman,

2004, p. 507). It is therefore imperative that the social and political issues portrayed through video games are addressed.

Political Context

Technology Use in Politics

The implementation of non-traditional techniques and structures to engage publics in the political sphere is not uncommon. Particularly during the 2001 General Election, the Conservative party implemented an online questionnaire, where users' would answer questions and receive a list of policies that they would identify with (Ward, Gibson and Lusoli, 2003, p. 654). This allowed users to explore and self-identify with trends and topics that the Conservative party, in particular, were working on that aligned with the user's interests, and provided an entry route to the political discussion.

Most notably, video games were utilised as a platform for campaign advertisement as part of Barack Obama's successful Presidential Campaigns in 2008 and 2012. Obama's campaign poster could be found in many of Electronic Arts' flagship titles, such as *Burnout Paradise, Madden NFL, NBA and NHL* video games. Obama's campaign was meticulously targeted in order to reach the 18-34 male voting demographic (The National, 2008), and research suggests that the campaign tactic made players "120 percent more likely to feel positively about Obama and 50 percent more likely to consider voting for Obama" (Takahashi, 2012). While this is an exhibition of a traditional, visual advertisement strategy placed within a video game, and differs from the design practice proposed in this article, it does highlight the opportunity for public engagement that politics can obtain through the medium of video games.

Projecting Democracy through Video Games

Knowledge, relatability and self-governance can be transferred and projected through video game design, such as a moral choice system with political agenda points to choose from, which can impact the players' experience. By breaking the political system into smaller fragments and publishing on a consumable format such as video games, voters may feel empowered to explore their political ideologies further. Video games benefit from presenting reactive and reflective scenarios through a dynamic virtual environment, as opposed to static text-based surveys and questionnaires.
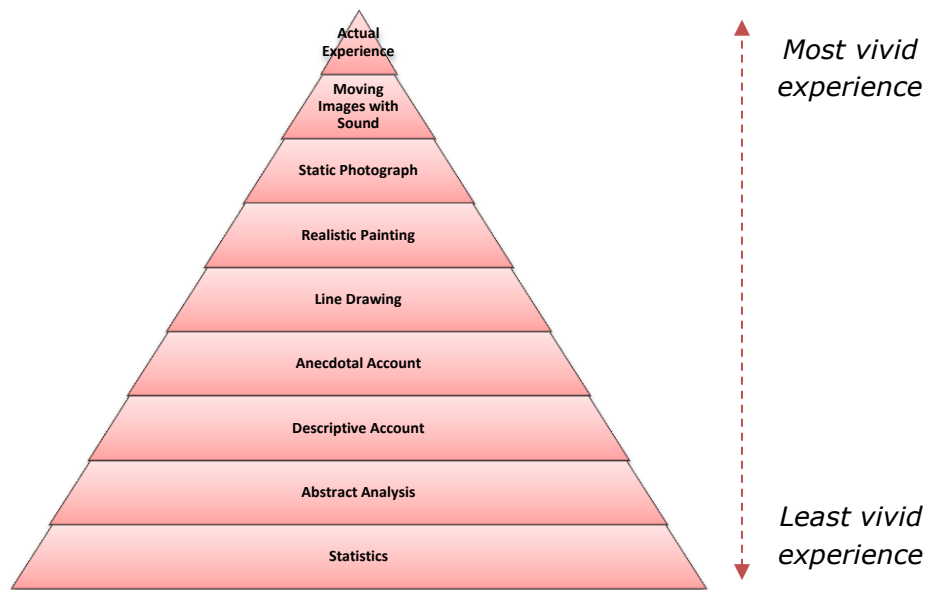
Figure 1: Continuum of Vividness (Hill and Helmers, 2008)

In line with the Continuum of Vividness theory (Figure 1), the interactivity and agency that is installed into the nature of video games offers a powerful platform for engagement, education and behavioural change. The interactive medium could arguably be placed above that of "Moving Images with Sound", as the element of autonomy and control that the player has could be a facilitator for influence and self-exploration, and provide for a more vivid experience which politics could benefit from exploring.

Social Context

If the young demographic is to be engaged in the political sphere, it is important to understand their behaviours within communities and communication.

Online Activity

The "Millennial" generation (Howe and Strauss, 1992) experience high usage of technology and Internet, and integrate accommodating technologies into their social lives (Junco and Mastrodicasa, 2007). The young demographic are "most likely to engage in online activities that focus[ed] on leisure or recreation, especially newer activities such as social networking (91%) … and playing or downloading video games (68%)" (Office for National Statistics, 2014, p. 6). Online communities, and the rise of social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter, are a staple in a vast majority of young demographics, with 91% of Millennials participating in social networks in 2014 (ibid). This evidence supports the idea that the young voting demographic approach social, online activities to connect with people in digital environments for entertainment, socialising, and knowledge transfer.

It is for this reason that "the Internet is often viewed as a potentially effective tool for mobilising people and for reaching out to social groups, who might otherwise be left out of the political process" (Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006, p. 299). This includes the young voting demographic that feel disengaged from mainstream politics. Online functionality and community engagement are attractive potentials that the political sphere look to capitalise on to increase political participation in all voting groups, particularly those in less socially-mobile groups such as home-carers, elderly and disabled.

Young voters are also more likely to be technologically-active, and any opportunity for behavioural influence would be best-placed online. This is supported through the Oxford Internet Survey, which found young people to be passive about engaging in verbal, offline political discussion, but were more likely to engage in – and actively seek out information on – politics in an online environment (Oxford Internet Survey 2005, as cited by Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006).

Youth "Life-Cycle"
Young people tend to be a lot more involved than other voting groups, but their activities are more disjointed from their community. This is referred to as the "life-cycle" model, in which young people are "more mobile and less integrated into the community" (Leighley 1995, p. 184). While their activism is not generally transformed into mainstream politics for any number of reasons, their potential to integrate and initiate change within the wider political spectrum exists. Facilitating that change has been the development of online presence and social media, which conducts mass mobilisation on a wider communal scale. By connecting this presence and community within the mainstream political sphere, voting figures may reflect the online activism and increase over time with the development of digital media.

Socioeconomic Structure

An additional factor influencing political participation to consider is the socioeconomic background of an individual. Defined as the Socioeconomic Structure (Larcinese, 2007), it was often argued that an individual's level of education is a contributing factor to their willingness to participate in politics (Leighley, 1995). However, more recent research suggests that this is not particularly the case for British politics and that political knowledge is not natural or inherent (Denny and Doyle, 2008). Therefore, the link between education and participation may be false, due to diversity and varying levels of knowledge (Larcinese, 2007).

Research in this area is "still far from knowing whether there is any causal link between political knowledge and participation" (ibid, p. 388). What is known is that "education has often been found to have a high influence on turnout" (ibid). While this does not guarantee participation,

it is considered to raise the probability of participation by up to 33%, dependent on the individual's political knowledge (ibid, p. 405).

There is an open-mindedness and optimistic approach to finding new measures to increase political participation in the United Kingdom. Such initiatives include "an 'e-voting' pilot study and the introduction of compulsory citizenship education in the school curriculum" (Denny and Doyle, 2008, p. 299). Video games and interactive media are an alternative and attractive opportunity for the British government to consider due to its ability to engage widespread audiences in a context that young voters can relate to (tangential learning through video games).

Play Theory

The theory of play has been researched extensively within game studies and the social sciences. Video game research has previously "contented itself with the limited purview suggested by the play concept" (Malaby, 2007, pp. 95-96), which has restricted video games to the theory of play as their sole component, alongside entertainment and escapism. With recent changes of thought and understanding, "we are now at a point where a reconceptualization of what games are reveals a whole new vista for social theory and research" (ibid, p. 96). This development of understanding has allowed video games to be understood on a social and cultural level, and has opened up video games for social application.

Defining Play

Video games become dangerously embroiled in a debate over the productivity of players in relation to play as a definition. Play has been defined as "an activity that is (therefore) non-productive, a place where nothing happens, a charge only bolstered by its association with youths" (ibid, p. 100). With this association of play, video games inherit a stigma of not contributing to society or of being outside of the boundaries in which the player's actions exist. But as research on play develops, it is more appropriate to consider play as exclusive from video games and inherent in human nature (ibid).

Removing the association of play from video games allows us to "free the game concept for rethinking" (Malaby, 2007, p. 102). It allows video games to be examined in a more open-ended and critical fashion: video games can be considered as an extension of humanity rather than a wholly-separable experience, and examine how video games can impact the social, political and cultural activity of humans.

Integrating Play

With the progression of play as "a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others" (Sicart, 2014, p. 1), the observation and knowledge about play transfigures across multiple levels, including that of video games. In reference to its traditional understanding in the context of video games,

play is more than an activity within an interactive context: it extends to the fabric of social existence. It concerns the position of humanity within society, and the level of engagement one has with the world. Sicart (2014) is consistent with the notion of play as part of humanity, as "we play games, but also *with* toys, *on* playgrounds, *with* technologies and design" (ibid, p. 2). Therefore, the importance of play as an activity is justified through its extension of play as a social construct, and its relevance to manifest participation in contexts that extend from video games.

Applying Play

When play in a cultural context is considered within the medium of video games, a connection can be established between video games and their application to social issues. Video games inherit "fundamental quality of multi-layered contingency that allows them to both mimic and constitute everyday experience" (Malaby, 2007, p. 107). Video games have the flexibility to reflect and dictate real-world events, and also simulate potential instances before their existence. This supports the attitude of Salen and Zimmerman (2004) towards cultural applications for social contexts, which suggests that "games are one place where the values of a society are embodied and passed on" (ibid, p. 516). From a political context, Sicart (2014) continues the theory that "play is political in the way it critically engages with a context, appropriating it and using the autotelic nature of play to turn actions into double-edged meanings" (ibid, p. 80).

The transfiguration of political content through the activity of play allows for intrinsically-driven exploration and discovery through player intrigue. It is in this theory that there lies possibility to design for political engagement through the medium of video games.

Democracy series

There are very few examples of political simulation video games, and even fewer that represent the British political system. But it is the wider application of the *Democracy* franchise that propels the theory of using video games to encourage political participation in the United Kingdom. Used in schools, colleges and universities in order to educate pupils and students of political theory and economics (Positech Games, n.d.), the franchise was also considered by the US Department of Defence to simulate government policy implementation (Warr, 2013).

Playing *Democracy*

The *Democracy* series allows players to assume the role of a parliamentary leader and compete with the Opposition to stay in power. This is achieved by keeping voters happy through expending their Political Capital to implement or alter policies (such as Tax, Welfare and Economy). By following a turn-based system, players face elections after a set amount of turns (depending on the chosen game settings). The explicit objective is to "win" by staying in power, but the way in which

the game continuously forces players think about their actions, as a result of the cause-and-effect statistics displayed in-game, reflects on the harshness of decision-making within politics.

Threats and Opportunities

While the vast resource of information, visual stimuli and extensive tutorial provides an engaging way to interact with the simulation of political leadership, the extent of knowledge available may prove to overwhelm the casually-involved or disenfranchised in politics. The inherent issue of *Democracy 3* lies in its design. Cliff Harris, the creator and designer of *Democracy 3*, admits that the game "assumes gamers are educated, intelligent, thoughtful and interested in complex world events" (Warr, 2013). This limits the application and benefits of *Democracy 3* to those that are propelled through self-motivation and interest in the political content, as opposed to inviting the politically-disenfranchised to integrate into the experience. The educated, thoughtful player assumed by *Democracy 3*, increases the likeliness that the game will be experienced exclusively by politically-involved players, and alienates the politically-disenfranchised. This presents an opportunity for a more inclusive game experience that players of all political backgrounds and knowledge levels can experience, representative of a functioning democracy in a social environment.

An opportunity that arises from *Democracy 3* is the integration of online communities and multiplayer, similar to inherent relationship systems in *Sid Meier's Civilization* series (in which players can develop alliances or hostility towards other players and their developments). The effectiveness of community and social belonging for inspiring participation and engagement has been well-documented (Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; Inthorn, Street and Scott, 2012; Denny and Doyle, 2008; Ward, Gibson and Lusoli, 2003). By integrating communities and social communication within the experience, *Democracy 3* presents a virtual space for wide demographics – from the politically-disenfranchised to the politically-engaged – to integrate and share opinions with teach other in a more familiar environment.

Political Design Framework

The Political Design Framework (Figure 1) is a design schema aimed to support the development of engagement-driven video games within political contexts. The framework supports a hybrid development structure, with a combination of iterative and sequential processes to create an appropriate context for development.
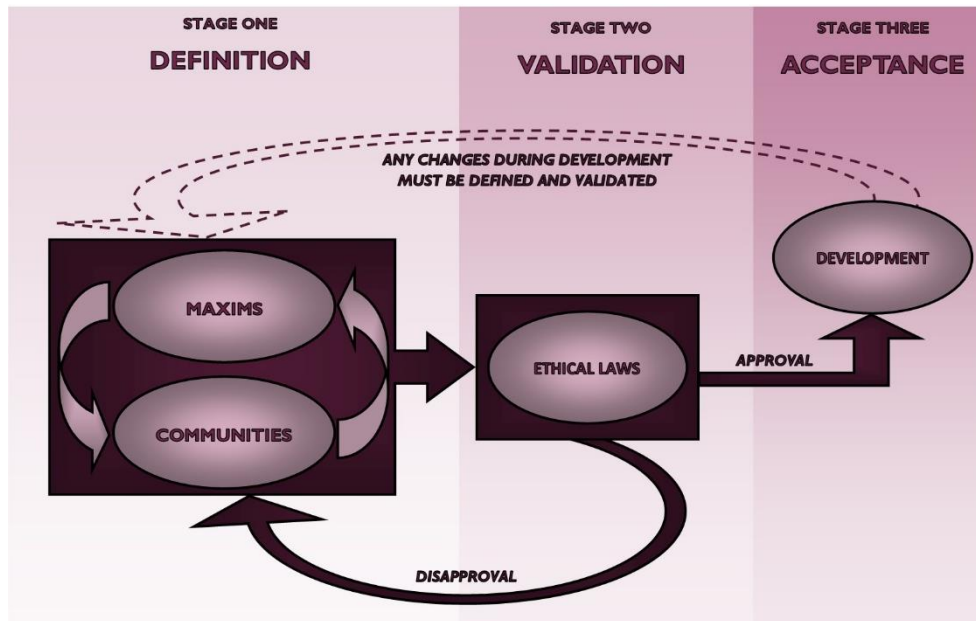
Figure 1. Political Design Framework.

Definition Design

The Definition stage can be understood as the establishment of purpose, and accepting player variables that can, or cannot, be controlled. This process begins by developing an understanding of the player and contextualising how your audience will be interacting with the game.

Firstly, developers must define the maxims that they will be designing for. Adopted from Devine, Presnell and Miller (2013), this is a user-centred design process that outlines three main components of a player's motivation to play the video game: the player's *circumstance* for playing the video game, the *actions* that they will be expected to perform, and the *goals* that they are aiming to achieve through their actions. From the developer's perspective, it is important to ask these questions for the following reasons.

CIRCUMSTANCE: What context influences your audience's goals?

The circumstance defines the context in which your player is playing the game. Whether they are playing for leisure, education, or other factors, the player's motivation should be understood in order to effectively design an experience to match or exceed their expectations. While Devine, Presnell and Miller (2013) suggest defining goals initially before considering circumstances, it would be advantageous to developers to consider the context which they are developing for, and can design goals around the circumstance that they aim to address.

GOALS: What goals does your audience have in line with their circumstance?

Goal-orientated design is pivotal to the process of encouraging political participation in the audience. Creating an experience that resonates with players and their own expectations provides a higher rate of success in

achieving intended outcomes. By mapping players' goals with the goals of the video game, players are more likely to build an intrinsic understanding and acceptance of the system that correlates with their ambitions within the political sphere.

ACTIONS: What will you allow your player to do to achieve these goals?

The action that you allow for your audience to exert provides the bridge between the digital space and the real-world context that the video game portrays. Conversely, should you prohibit or define certain actions as inappropriate, while these actions are an expectation to achieve a particular goal, then the player's motivations and chance of participating decrements towards apathy and non-participation. Therefore, it is imperative to understand and define what facilities will be at the player's disposal in order to achieve their goals.

Is further action necessary to achieve defined goals?

It is probable that some actions require further activity in order to achieve the desired goal. This can be explained in Figure 2, an alternative visualisation to the Maxim Authorship and Refinement framework (Devine, Presnell and Miller, 2013). If actions require further activity to reach pre-defined goals, then those actions become goals in themselves, and further action should complement the process in achieving this newly-defined goal. This stage of refinement allows developers to map out a player's experience and manage their motivations and expectations.

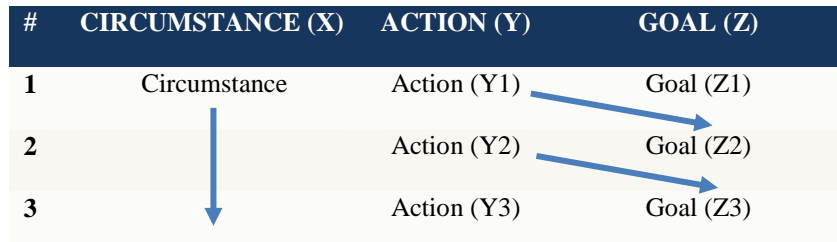| #	CIRCUMSTANCE (X)	ACTION (Y)	GOAL (Z)
1	Circumstance	Action (Y1)	Goal (Z1)
2		Action (Y2)	Goal (Z2)
3		Action (Y3)	Goal (Z3)

Figure 2. Alternative visualisation of Maxim Authorship.

While defining the actions available in the game, it is also important to consider the design grammars (Gee, 2007) with which your player is interacting. Developers create an opportunity to educate players within fictitious environments, and facilitate the transposition of behaviours to real-world scenarios through tangential learning. This experience should be core to the design of the video game, as the potential to engage and initiate behavioural influence over the player could result in attitudinal change towards voting apathy. This can be best explained through the *Democracy* series: players become more conscious and aware of the difficulties as a parliamentary leader through their own categorisation of actions and the emotional attachment they create among (fictitious) voting demographics.

Communities

It may be argued that developers must consider the integration of player communities as an important component of the design. It should be the developer's goal to develop a flexible, participatory environment between integrated and invested communities in order to achieve the goals set by the maxims. The success and strength of a democracy is a result of a mutual collaboration between communities, where each community (publics and representatives) assume responsibilities based on the outcomes of the electorate. As previously highlighted, video games are reflective of society, and thus to effectively represent a democratic system to be embedded into the political structure, each community must feel represented and assume responsibilities for certain outcomes.

Community integration can result from two design outcomes common in video games: *local play* and *online play*. Local play deals with the concept of two or more players interacting with the video game in the same physical space. Online play concerns the play and interaction of players taking place in a digital space, where the physical community is transposed onto an online space. The physical community can arguably provide a stronger sense of belonging as opposed to the autonomy of online communities, and can be more effective in influencing change from a community level. Online communities, however, present the chance of encompassing a wider audience in uniform discussions and debates, presenting a nationwide democratic system.

	DEVELOPER	**PLAYER(S)**	**EXTERNAL(S)**
DEVELOPER	What does the developer expect out of their video game?	What does the developer expect from the player(s)?	What does the developer expect from the external(s)?
PLAYER(S)	What do players expect from the developer?	What do player(s) expect from their own community?	What do player(s) expect from the external(s)?
EXTERNAL(S)	What do externals expect from the developer?	What do externals expect from the player(s)?	How will the video game inform the practice of the external(s)?

Figure 3. Community Expectation Management Matrix.

Developers must also be mindful of communication between communities: players, developers, and any external stakeholders invested in the in-game content and context. The feedback generation between these communities becomes pivotal to the effectiveness of the video game for wider application. Figure 3 highlights the use of a matrix

to establish and monitor expectations of each community. These expectations aim to assist in the design of the features of the video game, so that each community experiences the benefits that the interactive medium can offer.

Ethical Validation

Once developers have extensively developed the authorship of maxims and constructed a management of expectations between communities, the Validation process can begin. The Validation stage compares the ethical framework of the video game against individual, communal and social ethics in the context of politics and participation. It ensures the practice of participation in respect to the defined polity.

The Validation stage subjects the developer's contextual design to the consideration of three areas, with each area providing its own set of questions that require validation (Figure 4).

Failure to justify contextual design decisions from the Definition stage results in an invalidated ethical framework for the video game. Should any of the following areas be ethically-invalid, developers must reconsider their definitions of the invalidated areas and return to the Validation stage once an alternative solution has been constructed.

POLITICAL DESIGN	
Polity	*Does the video game represent the political structure intended?*
Certification	*Does the video game compromise the polity?*
ETHICAL DESIGN	
Substance	*Does the content compromise player engagement?*
Reflection	*Are real-world depictions contextually-justified?*
Artefactual	Does the artefact challenge existing social ethics?
Morality	Does the video game define a good-bad paradigm (if so, how)?
PLAY RHETORIC	
Procedurality	*Are players forced into particular actions or decisions?*
Certification	*Do forced actions compromise a player's personal integrity?*

Figure 4. Ethical Validation Framework.

POLITICAL DESIGN

The political design concerns the adherence to the governance system depicted within the video game. The political design is important in representing the intended political structure for players to interact

within. This design requires the understanding of polity that the developer intends to represent before the validation can take place. It is also vital to validate the polity in the context that the video game represents, and whether the existence of the video game compromises the nature of the polity.

ETHICAL DESIGN

The ethical design considers the player variables constructed from the definitions of maxims and community integration. The validation of ethical design can be segmented into the justification of video game content (Substance), the context in which the video game depicts real-world circumstances (Reflection), the social values that the video game challenges (Artefactual), and whether the video game imposes positive or negative connotations and results (Morality).

PLAY RHETORIC

Personal and communal play, and the flexibility of interaction, is the embodiment of play rhetoric within the context of the video game. Conversely to the political design and ethical design of the video game, the rhetoric of play is more concerned with the mechanics and influence at the disposal of the player, and the contexts in which these mechanics are available. The ethics of play rhetoric questions whether players are in control of the input, or if the video game forces them down a particular path that they have no control over. While some forced actions can be validated as necessary to the experience (i.e. choosing an option is a requirement), the actions should not compromise a player's integrity in regards to the context of the video game (i.e. choosing a *particular* option, and no other option, in order to advance the game).

Acceptance and Development

The Acceptance stage commences when the defined maxims and community integrations have been ethically validated. Design and development of the video game, with respect to the pre-established contextual framework, can begin. It is important to note, however, that any changes to the contextual design of the video game must be reviewed through the Definition and Validation stages before implementation, to mitigate the risk of compromising the context of the video game.

Discussion

The proposition of utilising video games as a means of encouraging political participation presents multiple barriers to overcome.

Participatory Culture

Participation cannot simply occur without some external driving factor: participation at rallies, committee meetings, and exerting the right to vote are fuelled by a pre-existing motivation, and do not exist in isolation of motivation (Leighley, 1995). Online participation, through

social media and online communities, is extensionally intrinsic in its nature, and provides a context of delivery for platforms aimed at engagement and participation.

Financial Constraints of Society

By introducing a digital means of participation, the prospective audience would naturally be targeted towards an audience with income to accommodate for such technologies (Leighley, 1995; Ward, Gibson and Lusoli, 2003). Unless the accessibility of twenty-first century technologies - such as computers and smartphones - are available to lower-income classes of society, the divide between socioeconomic classes may become institutionalised through the integration of such measures, and thus create a class exclusion from mainstream politics.

Financial Constraints of Development

Development and maintenance costs of a video game could also present an unnecessary financial barrier, resulting in this venture not being cost-reductive to traditional campaign strategies. However, if the participation rate increases amongst traditionally-disenfranchised demographics, then the development may be considered an investment to the strengthening of the democratic process, and become an integral communication method between the voting demographic and political institutions.

Self-Determination

It is difficult to increase political motivation through a technological or online environment if there is no pre-determined motivation. As the Internet and online communities are "a pull technology, it is more difficult to communicate with those who lack pre-existing political motivations" (Ward, Gibson and Lusoli, 2003, p. 654). Therein lies a danger that such methods would only stimulate communication to those that have pre-existing political motivations and opinions (Ward, Gibson and Lusoli, 2003), and therefore be ineffective to stimulating political participation among non-voters.

Video games can also be argued as a pull technology, as players are able to read reviews and watch trailers of video games before feeling motivated to make a purchase. The success of *Democracy 3*, however, presents an opportunity that there exists a market for a politically-explorative and flexible video game. The challenge lies in understanding the market that this video game appeals to – the politically-casual or the politically-extreme – and why they feel motivated to purchase the video game (to exert their political beliefs in a virtual environment, to understand the political system, etc.).

Research on individual motivation of participation is limited (Leighley, 1995; Larcinese, 2007) and therefore this knowledge gap must be filled in order to efficiently and effectively design experiences that produce the desired outcome of political motivation and participation.

Expanding Means of Engagement

This research interprets the lack of political participation through the traditional method of measuring voter turnout. Due to increasing use of technologies within the last decade, such as social media usage and the Internet, the spectrum of facilities for political participation has increased. In particular, the participatory attitudes of young voters tend to be stimulated by new methods of participation that are not commonly identified by the political hegemony. This suggests that young voters are engaging with political discussion through different media unaccounted for by the current political system (potentially due to a lack of technological infrastructure and support for digital interaction).

Conclusion

The research has established a relationship between video games and politics through their cultural differences, and suggested ways in which video games can be supportive in stimulating political participation. The research also analyses theories of play in relation to player psychology and motivation, in order to understand and implement relevant design principles that would support political participation among players.

Established design principles and existing uses of video games in social contexts provided critical information on contextual design principles. This influenced the development of a design framework intended for encouraging political engagement. More so, the authorship of maxims resonated with the aims of this research due to the stimulating nature for collaboration between stakeholders of potential projects in this area. This informed the creation and refinement of the Political Design Framework which focused on stimulating ethical development and collaboration within a video game environment, with the purpose of promoting political participation.

Future Research

Further research in participatory culture and the psychology of political motivation would help in validating design principles for player engagement and stimulating political motivation. This research would also be supported by generating developer and institutional interest in developing video games for political stimulation and participatory encouragement. Further iteration on the collaborative aspect of the Political Design process would aim to streamline partnerships with developers and political institutions in order to strengthen projects that stem from the process. The development of a prototype, with empirical application and evidence of applied research, will help to substantiate the principles proposed in this paper.

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