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Abstract

The meritocratic norm—the belief in total personal responsibility for one's successes and failures—tends to be reinforced by video games that allow players to take control of powerful, independent characters who exert enormous influence on the game world. This essay uses *Real Lives* as an example of a game that leads players to see the world from the perspective of ordinary people, whose lives are shaped by culture, geographical location, and chance events. This style of game play does not allow players to distance themselves from the uncontrollable circumstances that shape their character and their opportunities. It encourages players to think about distributive justice by presenting them with a much different view of luck and the role of personal hard work than what might be found in most other games.

Introduction

Playable video game characters in games designed for entertainment are usually powerful figures capable of defeating armies of opponents (as in first-person shooter games like *Medal of Honor, Call of Duty, Halo*, and *Gears of War*), constructing cities and empires (as in games like *SimCity*, *Civilization*, and *Total War*), or becoming super criminals (as in*Grand Theft Auto*, *Saint's Row*, and *Mafia*). Many role-playing games (RPGs)—including massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs)—even give players the opportunity to create personalized characters that are strong expressions of players'control of the game world. Character creation is an empowering mechanic that allows players to explore new identities or to develop idealized versions of themselves, but it also overestimates how much people can deliberately construct their own game personas (Wolfendale 2007; Taylor 2006; Waggoner 2009). Although the ability to take control of superhuman characters or to deliberately construct an identity is a large part of what makes such games enjoyable, video game characterization tends to exaggerate the extent to which any individual can control events in the real world. Culture, institutions, starting points, and the actions of others leave real people dependent on events outside their control, shaping their character and life choices. These kinds of game characters present a one-dimensional view of distributive justice and imply that powerful individuals are justified in exerting their will on others and reshaping the world to fit their desires.

In recent years, many video game developers have sought to develop more realistic games, but their realism tends to be superficial and limited to the game's appearance and subject matter. Realism is generally defined in terms of sophisticated graphics, rather than in terms of what Galloway calls social realism: a resemblance to the real world that goes beyond accurate visual representations (Galloway 2004). Few video game characters seem to be realistic in the sense of being akin to real people. Moreover, the power that characters tend to have over their world is often unrealistic, regardless of how perfectly a game's graphics mirror the real world.

Greater realism in the representation of characters and events could add new types of challenges to games designed for entertainment, allowing them to teach players indirectly. By

introducing a greater level of player dependence on context and chance, games have the potential to create meaningful learning experiences that encourage players to think more critically about the individual's relationship to the world. Such games can challenge the one-dimensional view of distributive justice by showing that people rarely have complete control over the events in their lives. This is true for games designed for entertainment as well as those designed for educational purposes. It is even more important for educational games, as these have a much greater responsibility for producing realistic simulations and serving a pedagogical function.

This essay will explore what a more realistic type of character creation and interaction with the game world might look like by drawing on the educational simulation *Real Lives* as a case study.[1] *Real Lives* is a prime example of what Mary Flanagan calls "critical play," which "is characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternates to popular play spaces" (Flanagan 2009, 6). *Real Lives* shows how a game can challenge players to reconsider their values by giving them less control over the game world (Educational Simulations 2010). The game generates playable characters and assigns starting attributes and opportunities based on those of the character's home country. Throughout the game, players must confront random events like disease, natural disasters, and crime. They must face the challenge of living as someone who is unlike the powerful figures in other games and has to struggle to build a character that starts life with the advantages and disadvantages of his or her location and status.

Real Lives is a useful starting place from which to begin thinking about the relationship between playable video game characters and the artificial worlds in which they live. Aside from its merits in performing its explicit educational goals, *Real Lives* provides a model of a style of gameplay that other games designed for entertainment and education can emulate. The developers' stated purpose in the game is to teach players about "how people really live in other countries" and to build empathy (Educational Simulations 2010). In addition to the game's explicit educational goals, such as teaching about other cultures and value systems, one of the greatest potential learning benefits that games like this offer is the manner in which they raise questions about the extent to which people can shape their own life circumstances. Experiencing a life simulation from the perspective of one of the randomized and more realistic characters of *Real Lives* is therefore a good introduction to the problem of distributive justice that is one of the foremost challenges in contemporary social science (Roemer 1996).

Real Lives and its style of presenting characters can be analyzed in terms of John Rawls's theory of distributive justice to show how it indirectly reflects on Rawls's argument about luck and the distribution of resources. I will also draw generalizations from this game to identify the kinds of game mechanics that encourage players to think about distributive justice. It should be pointed out that *Real Lives* is not alone in offering a critical perspective on social issues and styles of gaming. Other serious video games, including *3rd World Farmer*, *Peacemaker*, and *Refugee* have also been used to raise social issues and challenge existing conventions of gaming (Games for Change 2012). These and other serious games may be able to have the same pedagogical relevance as *Real Lives* if they make use of similar gameplay mechanisms.

Meritocracy and Control

One of the most prevalent beliefs in contemporary liberal democracies is that those who work hard will succeed and that failure is largely the result of laziness or ineptitude (Turner 1947;

Kernohan 1998; McNamee 2009). This essay will refer to this belief as the "meritocratic norm." As Kernohan explains, "Most members of a meritocratic culture, rich and poor alike, will share a belief that natural ability should determine material ability to form, revise, and pursue a conception of the good" (Kernohan 1998, 63). For over a century, this norm has been regarded as a defining feature of the European and North American worldviews. It was a central concern for some of the formative social theorists of the nineteenth century (Tocqueville 2007; Weber 2002) and in the twentieth century it was endorsed by many politicians, public intellectuals, writers, and politicians (McNamee 2009, 70). What exactly caused the meritocratic norm to become so pervasive remains a matter of debate, but its influence is undeniable. It is particularly powerful in the United States, where it has become part of the national belief that upward and downward mobility are directly related to a person's work ethic (Longoria 2009). It is reflected in the theories of prominent economists like Hayek and Friedman, in the works of writers like Ayn Rand and Horatio Alger, and in countless media images of self-made men.

Contemporary media often reinforce the belief that individuals have the power to control their own life circumstances by showing characters who struggle against adversity and achieve enormous success. Countless movies and books explore the theme of the lone figure who is born into humble circumstances and whose intellect and spirit makes them rich, famous, or powerful (Catano 1990; Friedman 2003). However, few media present the meritocratic norm as forcefully and consistently as video games. Although the plots of most video games rarely focus on the meritocratic norm as explicitly as movies and books, it is inherent in the way that games are structured; its influence is revealed through the immense power that players have to remake themselves and the game world. Most games put the player in the role of a premade character that is invariably strong-willed and capable of standing alone against overwhelming odds. These characters can sustain countless serious injuries and perform superhuman feats of dexterity and endurance. Many are capable of accomplishing almost any task, whether it is defeating hordes of alien invaders in *Halo* or *Gears of War*, winning the Second World War almost single-handedly in *Medal of Honor* or *Call of Duty*, or taking control of a city in *Grand Theft Auto* and *Saint's Row*. For example, many first-person shooters, such as those in the *Call of Duty* series and the *Medal of Honor* series, allow players to recover from serious injuries by simply taking cover for a few seconds or by finding "medical packs" that restore health.

The character creation and customization systems that some games offer not only give players control over a powerful character but also allow them to construct the character however they wish. In the typical role-playing game, such as the *Fallout* series, *World of Warcraft*, and *EverQuest*, a player may choose the avatar's physical appearance—sex, hair skin color, bone structure, etc.—down to the minutest detail. They can also select their character's starting abilities, their class, their status, and other important details. These characters are engineered to be tools for accomplishing the game's objectives. Moreover, over the course of playing these games, players can continue deliberately to develop certain dimensions of their characters by earning experience points and selectively improving whatever skills players consider important.

Whether the characters are premade or created by players, they have a very high degree of autonomy. It would be too much of an exaggeration to claim that video games help to create the meritocratic norm, as few, if any, confront it directly. However, many video games do indirectly support this norm with the amount of control they give players over the game world and their characters. Players are encouraged to see themselves as the arbiters of the fate of the game world—as supremely powerful figures who are capable of independent action and who are powerful enough to resist whatever challenges they face. This theme is further

emphasized by games that allow players to customize their game experience by giving them the power to win in multiple ways. For example, in *Fallout: New Vegas*, players can take many different routes through the game and determine which of the game's competing factions takes control of the Mojave Wasteland. The meritocratic norm is therefore not only a part of game narratives but also of what Ian Bogost calls the procedural rhetoric of the games—the message inherent in the structure of gameplay (Bogost 2007). The type of character that appears in these games will be called the "meritocratic character model" because of how closely it coincides with the meritocratic norm.

Challenging the Meritocratic Norm

There is nothing morally blameworthy about developing games that emphasize meritocratic values. Playing as someone powerful can make video games enjoyable. However, when many games adopt this model, they limit the kinds of experiences players can have and limits what games may be able to teach players. Games can present alternative views of player efficacy and the relationship between characters and the world. Presenting these alternative views may be a source of entertainment and it could also encourage players to think more carefully about a person's relationship with his or her context. Among the potential educational benefits of deviating from the meritocratic character model of representing playable characters is that games could encourage players to reflect on the extent to which the meritocratic norm is accurate.

Distributive justice is one of the central problems of contemporary social theory. This is largely due to the efforts of John Rawls, one of the most prominent critics of the meritocratic norm (Rawls 1999). His theory of justice includes the controversial difference principle, which holds that any inequalities of primary goods, "things that every rational man is presumed to want," that cannot be eliminated should be arranged so that they benefit the least advantaged members of society (Rawls 1999, 54). In other words, inequality of primary goods should be avoided, but it is often ineliminable, so justice demands redistribution to those who suffer from the inequality. This redistributive principle is antithetical to the meritocratic norm, as it partially bases the distribution of primary goods on need. To support his difference principle Rawls argues that the meritocratic norm is misguided because it overestimates individuals' power to control their circumstances. He challenges readers to consider how many of a person's achievements are attributable to events that are outside their control.

Rawls thinks that many of the most important events in a person's life are not chosen and cannot be fairly praised or blamed. Place of birth, early educational opportunities, family membership, social status, wealth, and physical attributes are among the many factors that are outside a person's control. Depending on the level of technology and cultural rules, many of these remain outside a person's control throughout his or her life. Nevertheless, these have an enormous influence on life prospects. Even if people are fortunate enough to have opportunities to improve their status and their material well-being, those who started from a disadvantageous position will have a more difficult time competing with others, making equal opportunity illusory. For example, one has a much better chance of becoming materially successful if one is born in the United States as opposed to Afghanistan, and it is easier for an American to become wealthy if they are born into wealthy family (Bowles 2005).

In *Real Lives*, choices are heavily shaped by where the character lives. Throughout the game, the player must struggle to balance his or her character's needs, to find a job, and to remain

healthy and happy. This can be very difficult depending on the character's starting place. *Real Lives* only allows players to make choices that are appropriate to the character's age, location, and abilities. Those who are born as women in traditional societies, who are minorities, or who live in poverty, face especially serious problems that may be impossible to completely overcome during the game. Some countries offer few job opportunities, some have poor human rights records, and some are plagued by epidemics. Upward mobility is possible, but sometimes it is only possible through immigration. Those starting in impoverished countries may attempt to immigrate to a place with better job opportunities, but this often comes with the risk of loss of property, imprisonment, or serious injury. The events that influence the character's life are related to the player's starting context. Each turn ends when the player chooses to age another year. During this year, contextually appropriate random events occur. These range from family members finding and losing their jobs or being infected with a disease to natural disasters and wars affecting the country. These events can also be frustrating, as they may destroy carefully laid plans and nothing can be done to prevent them.

Rawls acknowledges that people can raise or lower themselves within their context, but he maintains that every person is heavily dependent on chance events throughout their lives. Natural disasters, macroeconomic shifts, and wars are among the many events outside people's control that can destroy their opportunities for social mobility and deprive them of primary goods. People who believe in the meritocratic norm might take exception to Rawls's difference principle and assert that their own achievements result from some power of the will or individual drive. Rawls would counter by pointing out that even desire has to have a source. The will to succeed must be learned, like everything else, and is likely the result of parental encouragement, a good education, or some other factors that we are not responsible for.

Rawls argues that it is unjust to hold people responsible for misfortunes that result from the many matters of chance that shape their lives. It is therefore misguided to apply the meritocratic norm to judge people, when so much of success or failure is a matter of chance. This argument has received some support by scholarship on the relevance of luck in moral action, which shows that the moral character of actions is often determined by circumstances that are outside of our control (Nagel 1979; Williams 1981). "What we do," Nagel argues, "is also limited by the opportunities and choices with which we are faced, and these are largely determined by factors beyond our control." To use one of Nagel's examples, running a red light is blameworthy, but whether this is a harmless act or leads a driver to kill a pedestrian may depend on whether someone is crossing the street. This is a matter of luck from the driver's perspective because it is outside of the driver's control, yet this has an enormous influence on determining what crime the driver is guilty of (Nagel 1993, 58).

Whether Rawls is right or wrong is beyond the scope of this essay. Whatever one's feelings about the meritocratic norm, there is value in taking a critical look at distributive justice and considering whether the meritocratic norm is justified or whether Rawls's argument offers a convincing objection to it. Supporters and opponents can both benefit from taking a closer look at the extent to which lives are shaped by external forces and the extent to which these can be overcome. One way of doing this is by using games to simulate different ways of life. Game worlds are simplified representations of the real world, but as with all modeling techniques, we can learn something from these simplified representations when they accurately represent the phenomena being examined. Most video games are unable to serve as effective models in this sense because their characters are clearly unrealistic. However, games that more accurately reflect the real world, especially with respect to the power

individuals have over their own life circumstances, can be a useful way of reconsidering the meritocratic norm and the extent to which Rawls offers a convincing objection to it.

Contextually Embedded Characters

At the heart of Rawls's critique of the meritocratic norm is the idea that people cannot be praised or blamed for events that are outside of their control, events that are a matter of chance or randomness. Chance does play a significant role in some contemporary games, but not in the usual sense of the word. It is, for example, a central part of games in the *Fallout* series. In these games, luck is one of the player's character traits and it can have important consequences in determining events in the game. For example, the higher a player's luck score, the greater his or her chances of finding money or of experiencing beneficial random encounters. Many role-playing games and strategy games also incorporate an element of chance by using players' attack and defense scores to calculate the probability of defeating opponents or randomly choosing whichat enemies a player will encounter. However, in these games, luck is often under the player's control to some extent. The scores used to calculate probabilities are usually indirectly controlled by the player, who can improve his or her skills to gain more favorable odds. The luck score used in the *Fallout* series can be set at the start of the game and improved by finding special items, making it more like a skill than luck in the normal sense of the word. The elements of chance present in these games may disrupt their plans and encourage players to weigh probabilities when determining their courses of action, but they do not significantly change the level of control players have over the game. At most, they are brief disruptions that can be overcome by using a different strategy. For a game to encourage reflection on distributive justice, it must make greater use of chance in determining the player's characteristics and the events that shape the course of the game. It must also give players the perspective of a video game character that is more like an ordinary person. *Real Lives* is a promising example of how this can be accomplished.

Real Lives generates player's parents, family members, country of birth, and basic characteristics such as sex, health, and skills, before the player has any control over the character. This random selection of starting circumstances simulates the determination of one's starting point at birth. This is in marked contrast to the character creation systems used in many RPGs, which allow players to choose many of these traits. For example, in *Fallout 3*, one can choose the character's sex, age, physical appearance, strength, perception, endurance, charisma, intelligence, agility, luck, and special skills. In *Real Lives*, a range of material conditions appropriate to the character's region are also imposed. These conditions are determined by statistical regularities in the region where the character lives (Educational Simulations 2010). They reflect what a person in that location would likely encounter, and include attributes such as whether the player's character has access to necessities like food, water, and medical care, or a home, car, television, and other essential tools of modern life. The random character creation gives players control of someone who seems more like a real person than ordinary video game characters. Just as in real life, players have to make the most of a starting position that they did not choose.

Once the player has control of the character, he or she must do as well as he or she can, given their starting limitations. Just as in real life, there is no way of beating the game. The challenge is making choices that make the player's character happy and healthy or choosing some other standard by which to judge success. Throughout the game, the player's character is ranked on a 1 to 100 scale in terms of happiness, intelligence, artistic and musical abilities, athleticism, strength, endurance, appearance, conscience, and wisdom. Traits such

as intelligence and musical talent can be cultivated with practice, but training always involves a tradeoff. One skill can only be cultivated at the expense of something else. Just as in real life the player must satisfy multiple needs as much as possible given time constraints. Spending too much time working can have a negative influence on happiness, while avoiding the hard work of studying and exercising can limit job opportunities and result in long term health problems. The overall structure of character development is similar to other life simulation games, such as *The Sims*. *The Sims* also lacks an overall objective and rates players and their homes based on metrics that require players to carefully balance happiness, income, health, and other needs. However, the circumstances in which character develop in *Real Lives* are what sets them apart from the characters in other life simulation games. In fact, *The Sims* may be just as complicit in reproducing the meritocratic norm as other video games; it attempts to simulate real life while preserving central elements of the meritocratic norm, such as an equal starting place for all players and a direct relationship between players' choices and the outcomes they experience in the game world. As McKenzie Wark points out, in *The Sims,* players occupy an idealized, ideological space that is heavily shaped by the idea of meritocracy (Wark 2007, 42).

Changing Perspectives

Unlike the many video games that only give players the perspective of a powerful main character, *Real Lives* problematizes the meritocratic norm. Although there is no explicit discussion of the problem of distributive justice, of the meritocratic norm, or of the challenges to it, the game presents problems that encourage players to think about the issues that are at stake in the debate over distributive justice. The game offers strong support for Rawls's argument by showing that one's abilities and choices are contingent upon one's context, and by showing that random events can have a significant effect on a person's life. The extent to which the player is affected by outside forces makes a strong case for reconsidering the extent to which people are really responsible for their life circumstances. However, to a lesser extent the game also encourages players to think about the extent to which the meritocratic norm may be accurate. Regardless of their starting position, players can be more or less successful depending on what choices they make. They are given a number of choices: how to spend free time, what occupation to pursue, whom to have relationships with, and how to spend money. Each of these decisions may be used to exert some personal control over the world and to protect the character against chance events in future turns. A player who balances these decisions well may be more successful than a player who does so poorly, provided he or she starts from approximately the same starting position. The game even allows players to attempt to immigrate to other countries as a way of creating new opportunities. This provides a means of overcoming the inherent disadvantages of playing the game in a poor country.

Real Lives serves as an example of a different way of representing video game characters that deviates from the meritocratic model, but it is by no means the only game that could present an alternative perspective. The gameplay mechanics that *Real Lives* uses—the random assignment of starting characteristics, the influence of chance events, the influence of context in shaping available options, and the more realistic view of individual power over the game world—could be emulated by other games, whether they are designed for entertainment or education. *Real Lives* and other simulations that attempt to accurately mirror people's life circumstances could be used to introduce both students and gamers to the problem of distributive justice.

Little research has been done on the effects of the meritocratic character model on players' perceptions or on the costs and benefits of deviating from this model. However, it is possible to identify some of the potential benefits of exploring new ways of constructing playable video game characters. The foremost benefit for players of games designed for entertainment or education may simply come from challenging their perceptions and allowing them to see the world from a different perspective. Games provide an opportunity for players to gain firsthand experience of what it might be like to live as another person. Although many games provide the appearance of this change of perspective, they tend to undermine the learning potential of becoming someone else by adopting the meritocratic character model. They do not force players to grapple with the limitations that a real person might face or because they allow players to recreate that person in their own image through character creation.

Although *Real Lives* is an educational simulation, some or all of its gameplay mechanics could be used in games designed for entertainment that convey an alternative perspective. *Real Lives* does not directly address Rawls, theories of moral luck, the meritocratic norm, or distributive justice, but it is structured in such a way that these ideas are always implicit. The game raises questions about what people deserve to achieve by giving players insight into what it might mean to be a different person with different life circumstances without attempting to teach a particular lesson or even explaining the underlying problem of distributive justice. Games designed for entertainment could similarly pose challenges to the meritocratic norm and the meritocratic character model without attempting to teach a particular lesson.

The *Real Lives* mechanics have the potential to contribute to games designed for entertainment by offering a much different style of gameplay than players find in most popular video games on the market. Playing as a realistic character makes it difficult or even impossible to perform the superhuman tasks one finds in many games, but it also creates many new challenges. For example, rather than playing as a powerful character that can singlehandedly overcome all of the game challenges, players might be given the role of a more realistic leading character who must cooperate with others to succeed. Although this would constitute a significant deviation from the meritocratic character model, there is good reason for believing that it may be possible without compromising entertainment. Some online games, such as *World of Warcraft*, already limit players' individual power relative to the game's challenges in order to force them to cooperate to complete quests. To some extent, this helps to overcome the limitations of gaming based on the meritocratic norm, replacing it with one of cooperation. However, *World of Warcraft* only partly overcomes the procedural logic of the meritocratic norm, as players retain control over the creation and development of their own characters and can, when cooperating with others, exert a high level of control over the game world. Changing the power relation between the character and the game world to a larger degree and including the other mechanics demonstrated by *Real Lives* would allow games designed for entertainment to present new kinds of challenges.

The most significant limitation of *Real Lives* with respect to learning about distributive justice is that the subject is not explicitly presented in the game. Casual players may overlook this and other educational dimensions of the game. As I have argued, the game may raise players' awareness of this issue simply by showing them what the world may look like when seen from another person's perspective. However, there is no guarantee that playing the game will accomplish this, especially since the game does not directly refer to the issue of distributive justice, to Rawls, or to other theorists who take up the issue. This limitation can be overcome when the game is used in the classroom in conjunction with lessons that can highlight the other issues that the game confronts.

The greatest challenge I have encountered when teaching undergraduate political science students about the subject of distributive justice and Rawls's philosophy is leading them to think critically about their own assumptions about fairness. In my experience teaching American undergraduates, most of students accept the meritocratic norm and believe that the current system of distributing goods based on capitalist market principles with limited state redistribution is the most just arrangement. Rawls's challenge to the meritocratic norm often provokes vociferous disagreement. Many students object to Rawls's claim that much of our lives are determined by forces outside control. They also feel that this threatens their achievements. When Rawls's theory is presented by itself, there is a high risk that students will simply reject the argument outright without seriously considering whether Rawls is right.

By contrast, playing *Real Lives* before discussing distributive justice helps to problematize the meritocratic norm by showing how a person's circumstances can restrict their opportunities. This facilitates a more open discussion of whether Rawls's argument is correct and also provides the students with a shared experience that they can refer back to when explaining why they agree or disagree with Rawls. Because the game assigns players an identity based on chance, playing only once or twice may lead them to experience the simulations from a similar perspective to their own. Ideally players should complete three to five iterations of the game in order to experience the game from several different perspectives and to recognize the extent to which the game's difficulty changes according to the luck of their starting conditions. One iteration should take around 30 minutes, though the time varies according to the life expectancy in a character's birth country. Playing multiple iterations allows players to see that their achievements and misfortunes are closely related to their life circumstances. *Real Lives* does allow players to construct their starting identity, choosing their nationality and characteristics. Although this game mode may serve some education objectives, an instructor using the game to teach students about distributive justice should not allow players to deliberately construct identities as this can all too easily lead them to reproduce the limitations of games that employ the meritocratic character model.

Games that challenge the meritocratic character model can also be put to use in classes that address inequalities of wealth and the influence of life circumstances over a person's opportunities without focusing on theories of distributive justice. Francesco Crocco discusses the use of video and board games to help students learn about "hegemonic ideas about social mobility under capitalism" (Crocco 2011, 35). Although he does not address the subject of distributive justice in the ways one would in a philosophy or political science class, Crocco uses games to raise some of the same types of problems that Rawls discusses, such as the effects of unequal life circumstances. *Real Lives* and games like it might therefore be used in other educational settings aside from undergraduate classes in political science and philosophy, such as classes in which distributive justice is raised but the political philosophies of distributive justice are not specifically discussed.

There are several significant limitations on what *Real Lives*, or any other simulation of living in the real world, can accomplish when it comes to thinking about distributive justice. First, the game is only a model of the real world. It cannot serve as empirical evidence for or against a particular view of distributive justice and therefore cannot replace careful examination of the extent to which life circumstances shape real people's opportunities and decisions. Second, players are contextually embedded, like the characters they control. They will likely play in ways that reflect players' cultures and backgrounds. This could influence the way they play the game or limit the extent to which a game is capable of challenging their existing beliefs. However, these circumstances do not negate the value games can have in exploring the problem of distributive justice. Simulations may not serve as evidence that a particular side is right, but they can provide an experience that challenges players to think

more critically about the extent to which a person deserves their successes and failures. Distributive justice is a complex problem, yet it can be simplified and made more intuitive when it is presented in a simulation that mirrors real life.

Conclusion

A growing literature exists that shows the educational benefits of gaming (Michael 2006; Gee 2003, 2007). Many of these studies have shown that games can improve general skills like cognition and perception, while others have linked games to improved problem-solving abilities (Higgins 2000), higher levels of confidence (Jones 2002), and greater comfort with technology (Prensky 2001). This essay takes a different approach by proposing that games can also be used to help players think critically about specific problems even when these problems are introduced tangentially, as ideas that structure the game implicitly rather than as explicit lessons within the game. This is not to say that all players will benefit from this message or that all will reflect on how games challenge their assumptions. However, making the problem of distributive justice a prominent part of gaming can present a clear challenge that will encourage players to take a more critical perspective on their experiences of games. There is also a theoretical value in using games to explore the implications of abstract concepts. By taking a concept like distributive justice out of the realm of theoretical speculation and making it part of a simulation, games provide an excellent means of recontextualizing the problem by giving players firsthand, concrete experience of that problem.

Real Lives breaks with the usual video game format of giving players control of a powerful leading character. In doing so it gives players the opportunity to relate to a much different kind of character, one who does not have control of his or her starting position in life and who must struggle against events that cannot be controlled. This approach challenges players to consider the extent to which actions in the game are the result of the constraints placed on their character and the extent to which they reflect deserved personal achievement. The simulation does not take a position on this, nor does it attempt to offer lessons about distributive justice. However, by introducing players to this problem, *Real Lives* encourages them to consider distributive justice and to arrive at their own conclusions about it. The game therefore serves as a strong case study of game mechanics that might allow video games designed for entertainment and educational purposes to deviate more from the meritocratic character model. As this essay has argued, deviating from this model and developing games that raise serious questions tangentially, by virtue of the way they are structured and the ways in which they situate the player's character in relation to the game world, suggests a promising approach to making games that are capable of indirectly challenging players to think more critically about the issue of distributive justice.

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