Chapter 12
Digital Development and International Aid: Are Games Changing the World?

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ABSTRACT
This chapter constructs a historical overview of digital games used for international development. While the decade long use of digital games in this field has seen mixed results, a trend towards gamification has continued. The various approaches to international development taken in these games are analyzed alongside the gaming goals, platforms, and narrative structures. Broadly, this chapter argues that the field of digital development games breaks down into three categories: Developing Developers, Digital Interventions, and Critical Play. Because these games are tied to larger frameworks of development thought, they are an important part of the development discourse and should be critically analyzed, regardless of their success at the level of individual attitude and behavior change. Such an analysis presents a useful way to think about what’s happening in the current development field and how the trend towards gamification may impact its future directions.

INTRODUCTION
In a 2010 Ted Talk, award winning social cause videogame designer Jane McGonigal makes a few claims about the power of digital games to change our lives. Actually, she makes a few really big claims – claims so big they elicit laughter from the audience – about the power of gameplay to not only change our lives, but to in fact save our world. She declares that her goal for the next decade is to “try to make it as easy to save the world in real-life as it is to save the world in online games” (McGonigal, 2010). And to do so, she argues, we need to increase our collective time spent playing online games from the current 3-billion hours per-week to a massive 21-billion hours per-week (at least). Only by doing so will we be able to change the world and survive as a species on this planet, according to her calculations. It is clear why the audience laughed. Not because her claims are a joke – to her, and many serious game

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supporters, they certainly are not—they laughed because her world saving plan seems at once totally radical and yet completely simple: Play online games; make the world a better place. Presto. Of course, it isn’t all that simple. Beyond the big question—Can video games change the world?—there are many other, perhaps less obvious, questions that need to be asked, such as who is going to make these games? Who will pay for them? Who will and will not be able to play them, and thus, who will and will not get to actively change the world? And change the world to look like whose idea of better?

Similar questions have long been asked by those involved with (both in terms of practice and critique) the international development industry, the very purpose of which is to change the world in presumably positive ways. While there is general agreement that the goal of international development is to improve the living conditions of society, what is meant by “improvement” and how it should be achieved is widely debated (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). Whatever the “improvements” are deemed to be, innovations in mass communication technology have been considered key tools in achieving them throughout the history of the development industry. Digital games are no exception: although only recently heralded by mainstream media outlets as the “next frontier” for advocacy and aid groups, digital games have already been in use as a tool for international development for almost a decade, with mixed results (Sydell, 2013). The gamification of the international development industry is already underway, but many important questions have yet to be addressed: What is the potential of digital games to change and “save the world” in an international development context? What type of development will games promote? What are the implications of gamification for the development industry at large? And what will it mean for the people whom development is meant to serve? While researchers stop to consider these questions, McGonigal, along with a slew of international development and humanitarian aid organizations, nonprofits, and video game industry stalwarts are forging ahead, making decisions and coming up with their own answers.

This chapter conceptualizes the gamification of the international development industry as a process of game design for “productive interaction,” in which games are used to produce development-oriented results in a non-game context (Rughinis, 2013). Through the construction of an historical overview of digital games used for development the various approaches to international development taken in games are analyzed alongside gaming goals, platforms, and narrative structures. While technological trends certainly influence game design and implementation (and will be discussed), more important to an understanding of the gamification of international development is an analysis of how an organization’s approach to development defines the various characteristics of the game it creates—Who created the game and why? How is it played? Who is it for? What should it do? And for whom should it do it? Finally, because mass communication technology has played a major (and oft critiqued) role throughout the history of international development, the chapter questions whether gamification is merely the most recent iteration of a longstanding discourse on technology as the key to international development, or if it presents truly new implications for the field and its future. An analysis of the themes, successes and failures of digital games used in international development is important for scholars and practitioners in a variety of disciplines, including development communication, international communication, international studies, nonprofit management, public relations, and advertising.

BACKGROUND

Mass communication technologies have been used in international development projects since the very beginnings of the field. Just as innovations in communication technologies have changed the media
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