Chapter 11

A Framework for Collaboration among Game Designers and Social Change Makers: Multiplayer Missions That Matter

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ABSTRACT

We live in an age of networks: transportation networks, computer networks, economic networks, research networks, energy networks, social networks, the list goes on. Each consists of nodes connected to each other to manage the production and distribution of output to network users. Two large networks that share some particularly interesting overlap are gaming networks and advocacy networks. This chapter encourages an understanding of the potential overlap of these types of networks – both of which involve many millions of users, countless hours of interaction and billions of dollars of investment – and explores the intersection and impact of games designed to matter and gamified advocacy efforts. The chapter concludes with a proposed common planning framework from the field of advocacy network building and explores how gamification may more deeply help drive advocacy and social change, while advocacy work also opens new, valuable and more meaningful interactions and ideas for game designers.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the election of the entire United States House of Representatives cost $1.1 billion and engaged more than 115 million people in voting. The 2012 election was the most expensive election on record and included the engagement of tens of thousands of volunteers, campaign activists and candidates working in every neighborhood in every state (“2012 Election Spending,” 2012). The most expensive race for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives was in Florida, where in that one race alone it cost more than $250 million.
$29 million to ultimately influence and engage 331,000 voters – an approximate spending of $88 per voter (Trygstad, 2012). In any election, people are inspired (or forced) to learn about the candidates, the issues, the news and the process of voting. The dominant teams of political parties rally both new voters and experienced voters to the polls. Elections bring out a wide range of people and initiatives including professional campaign teams, lone advocates and ad hoc efforts to rally groups of people. Overall, the 2012 election was a high-stakes struggle which consisted of nearly two years’ worth of effort and a billion dollars’ worth of donations and expenditures, just to organize formal and ad hoc teams to win an election.

Switching fields, within the first 24 hours of its release in September 2013, Grand Theft Auto V sold over 11 million copies, generating an estimated $815.7 million in revenue (Lynch, 2013). By the end of the third day, the game had reached $1 billion in sales – almost equal to the total cost of the election of the entire House of Representatives in 2012. In May 2014 when Take-Two Interactive, the developer of Grand Theft Auto V, released their 2014 fiscal year report, the game had sold more than 33 million copies (Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc., 2014). An article published in Forbes noted that, “Assuming people paid the full $60 (an incorrect assumption, as many people probably picked it up on sale, but a useful assumption nonetheless), that means that Take-Two has sold $1.98 billion worth of Grand Theft Auto V (Thier, 2014).” Nearly $2 billion in sales for one game is nothing to scoff at, but it is still just a drop in the bucket compared to the overall $21.53 billion the gaming industry made in 2013 – similar to how one candidate’s election campaign is only one small part of an entire election. And, like politics, the gaming industry brings together a wide range of users of all ages – kids, teenagers and adults – as well as people from every background and walk of life. In fact, according to a recent report from the Entertainment Software Association (2014), 59 percent of Americans play some sort of video game. Interestingly, the Center for Voting and Democracy lists an identical percentage as the number of Americans who voted in the 2012 elections (Fair Vote, n.d.).

The 2012 Election Day represented a single event of many advocacy networks’ focus, much the same way as one game release is a single event within the larger scope of video gaming. Both advocacy networks and gaming networks involve many millions of people, countless hours of interaction and billions of dollars of investment, and in each case, the efforts are part of a broad landscape that includes a variety of industries. There is an opportunity to look at the overlap among the aspects of advocacy networks and gaming networks. Not only is there definitely an overlap in the actual people involved with each, but at the heart of both types of networks are similar design and implementation challenges: how to attract people, engage them with your content, learn about their skills and interests and connect them with each other to work together for mutual benefit.

Gamification has already been used effectively in fields ranging from science to education and humanitarian work, but leaders in political advocacy and issue-based advocacy have largely not yet tapped into the potential power of gamifying their efforts. Given how similar political networks and gaming networks can be, this seems to be a missed opportunity. Some advocacy leaders (both political and issue-based) are beginning to explore invoking gamification strategies in their own efforts, using mechanics such as quizzes, point systems, badges, achievements and progress bars to build support and engagement for their efforts. Those working toward the gamification of advocacy are also beginning to consider sharing the broader lessons of game mechanics to the overall strategy of movement building. Likewise, the lessons from advocacy network building can be applied to game design, allowing these two fields to interact in ways that once were not thought possible.

The age of networks is not only the age of connected players but also the age of connected social movements—and in both gaming and advocacy work, the fields have been discovering ways that participants