

## **Case Study: Games for Change**

### **Why Games for Change?**

I really like the idea of social action and open space documentary, or perhaps more generally open space media, and think that there might be some intersections between open space and *serious games*. In her paper titled *Open Space Documentary* (2011), Helen de Michiel describes open space documentary as being an emerging framework for community-based media. She elaborates on this concept in stating that “new technology and social media have quickly created biodiverse habitats where artists are able to test how media can communicate stories, imagine social change, and function as a dynamically evolving participatory ‘open space’” (de Michiel, 2011). It seems that video games, or more specifically *serious games*, might be another form of media that would benefit from existing in an open space framework. While not all games could exist this way, a good portion would likely benefit from a broader development community, an open social engagement layer, and user-generated narratives and interactions. While serious games aren’t entirely open source, many of the games are given away for free, enabling an open dialogue between interface, narrative, and the gamer. I think it is interesting to think of serious games within the context of open spaces.

### **History**

The Games for Change organization was founded in 2004 following a Serious Issues, Serious Games’ conference held at the New York Academy of Sciences. Games for Change facilitates the creation and distribution of social impact games, also known as Serious Games, that serve as critical tools in humanitarian and educational efforts (Games for Change, 2011). Games for Change aims to utilize the entertainment and engagement aspects of video games for social good. The organization holds an annual

festival and has participated at the Game Developers Conference, Serious Games Summit, E3, Games and Learning Conference, and several others. The Games for Change Festival found its start in 2005 and is currently held at New York University (Wikipedia, 2011).

### **Mission Statement**

Catalyzing social impact through digital games

Founded in 2004, Games for Change facilitates the creation and distribution of social impact games that serve as critical tools in humanitarian and educational efforts. Unlike the commercial gaming industry, we aim to leverage entertainment and engagement for social good. To further grow the field, Games for Change convenes multiple stakeholders, highlights best practices, incubates games, and helps create and direct investment into new projects

### 3a. Founders and Current Leadership

The Games for Change movement first emerged at a Serious Issues, Serious Games' invitation-only event held at the New York Academy of Sciences in 2004. Academics, non-profits, and representatives from more than forty foundations attended the event. Suzanne Seggerman of Web Lab, Benjamin Stokes of NetAid, Barry Joseph of Global Kids, David Rejeski of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, and Thomas Lowenhaupt of the Queens Community Board organized the event. Support was also provided by the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars and Serious Games Initiative (Wikipedia, 2011).

Games for Change is currently lead by two co-directors – Asi Burak and Michelle Byrd.

- Asi Burak leads on the curation, development and execution of programs and services to raise the production, quality and influence of social impact games, and serves as a spokesperson for the organization.

- Michelle Byrd leads on institutional relationship and partnership efforts, along with fundraising, business affairs, financial management, and communications strategy.

## **Partners**

### Staff

- Jeff Ramos - Community and Content Manager. Jeff works to build the organization's presence as a resource online and offline at various community events
- Iva Benadetto - Festival Program Manager. Iva has a background in media strategy and production.
- Hsing Wei - Festival Awards and Special Projects Manager. Hsing is responsible for developing new content, products, and partnerships for a range of for-profit and non-profit clients.

### Board of Directors

- Lucy Bernholz - President, Blueprint Research & Design, Inc
- Sharon Knight - President, 1Life Healthcare Inc.
- Dave Rejeski - Director, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
- Gobion Rowlands - Chairman and Communications Director, Red Redemption Ltd.

### Advisory Board (2010-11)

- Drew Davidson - Director, Carnegie Mellon University Entertainment Technology Center
- Mallika Dutt - President and CEO, Breakthrough
- Rafael Fajardo - Director, SWEAT Collaborative

- Tracy Fullerton - Associate Professor, USC School of Cinematic Arts
- Megan Gaiser - Chief Creative Strategy Officer, Her Interactive
- Dr. James Paul Gee - Professor, Arizona State University
- Alan Gershenfeld - President, E-Line Media
- Jessica Goldfin - Special Assistant to the President, Knight Foundation
- Sam Gregory - Program Director, WITNESS
- Barry Joseph - Director, Global Kids
- Michael Levine - Director, Sesame Workshop
- Jane McGonigal - Director of Games Research & Development, Institute for the Future
- Cara Mertes - Director, Sundance Documentary Film Program
- Shelley Pasnik - Director, Center for Children and Technology, Education Development Center
- Subhi Quraishi - CEO, ZMQ
- Gobion Rowlands - Chairman and Communications Director, Red Redemption Ltd.
- Susana Ruiz - Co-Founder, Take Action Games
- Suzanne Seggerman - Independent Consultant
- Ben Stokes - PhD Candidate, USC Annenberg School of Communication & Journalism
- Chris Swain - Director, USC Games Institute
- Ward Tisdale - Director, AMD Foundation Global Community Affairs
- Dan White - CEO, Filament Games
- Lisa Witter - CSO, Fenton Communications
- Eric Zimmerman - Professor and Game Designer, NYU Game Center

### **Funding and resources**

- MacArthur Foundation
- Knight Foundation
- AMD Foundation
- National Endowment of the Arts

- National Science Foundation
- Hearst Foundations
- ITVS
- GDC Online and Web Wise Kids
- National Research Foundation (Singapore)
- Samsung
- JCE
- Channel 4 Education
- The Advancing Scholarship for the Humanities and Social Sciences
- Game Innovation Lab at the University of Southern California
- Canadian Media Fund (CMF)
- Bell New Media Fund
- TVO
- Infodev
- Korean Trust Fund on ICT for Development
- Innovation Works
- Angel Investors
- Idea Foundry

### **Participatory Model**

Games for Change is best aligned with the interdisciplinary participatory model, as serious games are developed with funding from a variety of organizations with different backgrounds, initiatives, and concentrations. The primary focus of the Games for Change movement is to create games that have a social impact. With that, games explore different themes within a variety of contexts and through a broad interdisciplinary lens.

### **Overall Significance**

Games for Change is significant in that it strives to use a medium that is traditionally associated with fantasy, puzzles and entertainment and repurpose it for use in the sciences, humanities and for social action. The organization is uniquely positioned between the private and public sectors and strives to find ways to fund games that can

have a real impact on society. In an interview between Games for Change co-director Asi Burak and Mashable.com's Melissa Jun Rowley, Asi established that he believes games are going to be the most powerful media of the 21st century, but recognizes the challenges that come with measuring the success of games designed to drive social impact (Mashable, 2011). Games for Change strives to leverage entertainment and engagement for social good. Celebrity talk show host and comedian Ellen DeGeneres comments, "Instead of earning points, you earn Joy. How great is that? And then, you give Joy to the real-world projects that actually help kids in need. It is the coolest thing" (Gamesforchange.org, 2011).

### **Specific Attributes and Characteristics for Participation**

Games for Change provides services that can help connect visionaries with professional game developers, designers and other team members who are essential to developing and producing games. Games for Change also allows game developers to submit their games for possible inclusion in the Games for Change Arcade. Participant-led Games for Change Meet-Ups can be scheduled via the website. The organization also hosts a Google Group where social impact games can be discussed, and connects with participants on Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo, Flickr and other media channels.

### **Technological Changes and Economic Crisis**

#### *Technological Changes:*

Aside from the standard technical requirements associated with developing a game (design, programming, narrative), developing games for foreign countries, particularly those countries where mobile phones are the primary form of technology on the personal computing level, can be a challenge. During an interview that I conducted with Jeff Ramos, Community and Content Manager at Games for Change, Jeff expressed that Games for Change is working to develop projects for countries where computing is different than what is common here in the United States or other technologically advanced countries. He established that in some countries where cellphones are

ubiquitous, a common cellphone is often shared amongst an entire family. Jeff expressed that it is important to find ways to engage these audiences by using pervasive technologies so that participants can work through their unique social issues.

### *Economic Crisis:*

Jeff Ramos also stated, “In terms of western economic crisis, the biggest problem in terms of economics is that unlike the commercial industry, the way money is used to make games is totally different. With Games for Change, a lot of games are free, so money needs to come from foundations or donations. Games aren’t cheap to make and can take a very long time to develop. Some games cost from \$50,000 to half a million dollars, and up. As an example, a Facebook game might cost someone half a million or one million dollars to make. Not easy money for a start-up project to come by. A lot of people are having trouble because money isn’t there to start projects and work with developers on games that can take 6-18 months to make. Games for Change attempts to solve these problems by finding organizations to help fund projects like this. “

### **Community**

The Games for Change co-directors are working to expand the organization’s reach to a broader international community and has already expanded into Latin America and Europe. Using its website, blog, social networks and other media channels, Games for Change engages participants by providing them with a platform to share and play serious games, and an online community for sharing news and ideas. While Games for Change has a strong online presence, it also has an excellent physical presence in the real world. The organization hosts its annual Games for Change Festival, conducts Games for Change Meet-Ups at various locations around the world, and participates in a wide array of events ranging from augmented reality games to large conferences like the Game Developers Conference. Games for Change is as connected with participants in the physical world as it is in the online world.

### **Cross-sector Interactions and Outreach. Name a past success and a future goal.**

While Games for Change is very cross-sector and interdisciplinary, some extensions might include citizen science projects like *Fold It*. *Fold It*, a game about folding proteins to understand the nature of how they work, is a renowned success in that a group of players were able to find a protein in the AIDS virus that had been troubling scientists for many years. Astoundingly, the player solved the problem in just three weeks of time. Moving to a broader, international scale, Games for Change recently worked on a game called *Nanu Planet* that was pertinent to the Korean Demilitarized Zone. While interviewing Jeff Ramos, he expressed that this was an extremely sensitive project and that the biggest challenge was making a game that wouldn't pose a threat to either side of the DMZ. Astonishingly, *Nanu Planet* won a Korean award for Best Serious Game. Jeff Ramos stated, "This was a very big deal because it shows that serious games are accepted on a commercial level." With regard to future goals, Games for Change plans to continue developing high quality and award-winning games on an international scale.

### **Online Participatory Experience**

Games for Change uses a transmedia approach to engage multiple audiences across a variety of platforms. It recently held a *Transmedia* category as part of an awards ceremony at the 2011 Games for Change Festival, and is currently working on a major project for the *Half the Sky Project*, which is based on the New York Times Bestseller *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* that was written by Pulitzer Prize winning authors Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. Games for Change acts as the Executive Director on the gaming component of *Half the Sky* and PBS is working on the documentary series.

In an interview with Jeff Ramos, he expressed, "Transmedia is the next wave of how to really engage audiences, especially with social good campaigns. You can't necessarily hope that people who read books will be the only people engaged in social good campaigns. To reach audiences in different ways, transmedia really pulls the project together and finds different ways to spread the message to

different audiences on certain platforms in ways that feel meaningful and that would engage those users in a way that they are comfortable with.”

### **User Interactions**

The Games for Change organization uses a transmedia approach to interact and connect with its participant base. From the gamer perspective, participants can explore a strong collection of social action games at the Games for Change Arcade. From the production perspective, game developers, visionaries, producers, designers and other game professionals can partner with each other by connecting with Games for Change and using its services. The general public can interact with Games for Change via its website, blog, and social media channels. Game developers who would like to submit a game for inclusion in the Games for Change Arcade can do so via the website. In addition, participants can network and learn about social action games at the Games for Change Festival or at one of the many other events that the organization participates in.

### **Branding and Style**

Games for Change uses a variety of media channels to support its initiatives for outreach and branding. The Games for Change website has a design that is clean and targeted to gamers and techies, as one would expect. Naturally, the majority of the website is dedicated to sharing games, news, videos, and other content with the Games for Change community. Games for Change is also working on a project called *Half the Sky* (<http://www.halftheskymovement.org/>), which features an interactive and compelling interface that matches the look of the cover of the *Half the Sky* book. Games for Change productions have a professional polish and are definitely designed for mass-market appeal, which is an essential component for Games to Change to utilize when connecting lesser known social impact games with larger mainstream communities.

### **Development to Completion**

The Games for Change movement found its start in New York in 2004. Current leadership is focused on enriching and expanding the Games for Change scope, and

Games for Change has offices in foreign countries, including France, Korea and Brazil. The organization's online assets are a continual work in progress, in that the assets are games and new media projects. With games being the primary projects associated with the Games for Change movement, older games are archived, but still made available to the public, while new games are featured on the Games for Change website and through other various media channels.

### **Current Assets**

- Games for Change Festival – annual festival with keynote speakers like Al Gore and Gabe Newell of Valve Software
- Games for Change Arcade – collection of new and recent games including *Win the White House*, *Wondermind*, and *Codeacademy*
- Games for Change Lab – strategic advising, development and production

### **Current Project Goals**

- To continue growth and participation at the annual Games for Change Festival
- Support online and transmedia presence and initiatives
- Expand international scope and outreach

### **Project Outcomes**

- 2012 Game Developers Conference debuts Games for Change Summit
- Games for Change named a 2011 Tech Awards Laureate by The Tech Museum
- 8th Annual Games for Change Festival Celebrates the Global Expansion and Reach of Social Change Games on Four Continents
- Various media channels have been promoting Games for Change and its focus on social change

### **Project Impact**

Games for Change does collect and review analytics and a growing community database, but wasn't willing to share statistics as it preferred to limit data to its funders and

partners. Games for Change does appear to be progressing with a strong amount of momentum as the organization has received national awards, international recognition, and acceptance to participate at the Game Developers Conference – one of the largest gaming conferences in the world. The Games for Change Festival also finds success with more than 800 attendees in person and 8000 via live stream.

### **Participation and Engagement Assessment**

Games for Change partners with different organizations who have a variety of impact and learning objectives. The organization works with organizations that don't make games as their primary form of business - like the World Bank, NY Public Library, Museum of Natural History. Games for Change helps them to create games around social impact and learning, which engages communities and audiences with games and helps them to learn about Games for Change and interface with it as an organization.

Both of Games for Change's co-presidents are regularly interviewed by news organizations and media outlets and they try to work with products that engage general audiences. Some recent partnerships include the Come out and Play Festival, which is an outdoor game that is designed leave a positive impact in the environment within which it was played. Another recent partnership was the River-to-River Festival in Lower Manhattan, which was designed to engage the general public to come out and play games and have a positive impact. Games for Change also attends non-gaming events like the New York Tech Meet-Up, which happens to be the largest technology meet-up in the entire country, to see who people are using technology.

### **Overall assessment of the organization/project in terms of:**

Games for Change succeeds as a cultural and social asset within the social action and, in part, open space framework as the organization continually seeks ways to engage participants to play its games and work through real social issues that affect society here in the United States and abroad. My evaluation of Games for Change has evolved from

an initial response, which was more along the lines of being fascinated with the idea of video games that can broaden the capacity for social good. After researching Games for Change it became clear to me that serious games can be used to solve real problems in the sciences, societies, and in education. Imagine the amount of good that could come from serious games if gamers spent thousands of hours per week trying to solve real problems instead of grinding through fantasy narratives or gunning through a battlefield. Some concrete and practical solutions that Games for Change offers is with regard to social media and engaging the public. Games for Change utilizes many of the popular social media channels to get the word out about new games, awards, contests, news and upcoming events. The organization also brings people together in the real world through its annual Games for Change Festival and by participating in a variety of other events.

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Jeff Ramos (phone interview, November 22, 2011)