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Will more professors develop video games for their classes?

by Rachel Aviv

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On Martin Luther King Day in 2002, the West Virginia-based white-power group known as National Alliance came out with *Ethnic Cleansing*, a video game for neo-Nazis and similarly deranged Americans. A beefy white character dressed in Klan robes darts around a city slaying "sub-humans," who, upon collapsing, whimper little death-ditties ranging from "Oy vey!" to "I'll take a siesta now." In the background, plans for world domination and inspirational hints like "Diversity, It's Good for Jews" are pasted on subway walls and street lamps.

Ethnic Cleansing doesn't just indulge such fantasies, but meticulously teaches the specifics of its worldview (why we should kill, who we should kill, and the history of white "victimization") through repetition, hands-on participation, and a series of escalating challenges. The natural instructive potential of video games—currently enjoyed by mostly religious and military groups—has caught the attention of educators willing to try anything that gets a student to become obsessive about mastering a system of thought. As James Gee, a professor at the University of Wisconsin and author of *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About*



illustration: Anthony Freda

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Learning and Literacy (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), sees it, Ethnic Cleansing is a persuasive example of how games can be used to convey ideological messages. "Modern video games are profoundly motivating, certainly much more so than textbooks," he tells the *Voice*. "They're about taking on an identity, making choices and looking at the world a certain way. We can only hope that people with better philosophies than the National Alliance make some games. What about the worldview of a scientist?"

Recently a handful of professors across the country have developed video games for their classrooms that dramatize science, history, politics, and even literature. At MIT, a group of scholars and software designers—leaders in the Microsoft-funded Games-to-Teach project—designed 15 prototypes for college use. In *Sole Survivor*, an *Intro to Psych* game, students experiment on a series of depressed, psychotic, or otherwise dysfunctional individuals in order to save the world from "evil leaders of a Planetary Alliance." *Prospero's Island*, a lit-crit simulation being designed in collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company, has players work through *Tempest*-specific metaphors by completing tasks—feeding junipers to Caliban (for increased sex and strength), or literally climbing the waterfall of Prospero's tears.

So far, the only design used with any real frequency (or that has significant funding) is *Environmental Detectives*, a game about toxicology that, according to the publicity material, "combines the dramatic appeal of *Erin Brockovich* with the pedagogical value of inquiry-based learning." A digitalized quest for the source of a "mystery" chemical spill, E.D. has been used in about 14 courses, the majority of them at Harvard and MIT. Games-to-Teach designers hope that more classrooms will adopt not only the game, but the obsessive video game culture—in particular, the lack of stigma surrounding failure.

But even for profs who agree that their teaching methods could use a technological update, video games are still financially forbidding, not to mention conceptually loony. According to Edward Castronova, a professor at the University of Indiana (and author of the forthcoming *Synthetic Worlds*), "At this point, saying to an English professor, 'Why don't you teach this course with a video game?' is kind of like saying, 'Why don't you teach this course with a basketball?'"

A self-described "academic failure," Castronova once wrote an economics paper in which he computed the gross national product per capita of the fantasy land in Sony's *EverQuest*, declaring it the 77th richest nation in the world. He is part of a burgeoning community of professors who rely on dreamy, digital netherworlds to convey course material—each one describing their class as the "first of its kind."

At Northern Illinois University, Stephen Haliczer, a proud "apostle of interactivity," designed a simulation, "Surviving the Inquisition," for his online course "Witchcraft, Heresy, Criminality, and Social Control in Modern Europe." Students play a converted Jew who is tried by an Inquisitor and then tortured, absolved, or burned at the stake.

"It was a blast," says Michael Spires, a grad student in Haliczer's seminar

in 2003. "The standard image that most non-historians have of the Inquisition is that it was run by terribly vicious and oppressive people, but that is really not the case. When you play, you see—if you had any wits about you, you could game the system."

Wary of misrepresenting history, most humanities professors who have experimented with digital simulations have done it in slightly tamer contexts, where the gamer mentality can co-opt the academic lesson without any major distortion. The U.S. Congress simulation LegSim (now being used at more than 10 schools, including SUNY Geneseo, Brown, and the University of Oklahoma) allows students to operate their own virtual legislature—drafting bills, "meeting" in committee, and voting online. The New School is developing a similar kind of political digi-world called Swing States—undergrads will play a Republican or Democratic presidential candidate, fighting to win an election.

Although New York schools haven't designed many curricular games, the city has pushed ahead in a slightly different field—"meaningful content" games, which promote social and political awareness. Last June, a trio of New York-based nonprofits (NetAid, a U.N. organization that fights world poverty; Global Kids, Inc., a leadership group for urban youth; and Web Lab, a new-media think tank) hosted a conference called "Serious Issues, Serious Games" to explore ways of using digital playthings to "advance society." Out of the conference emerged Games for Change, an interest group that has already worked with a number of pristine simulations where "winning" involves successfully dealing with issues like AIDS, poverty, and racial profiling.

For educators, games are not only a catchy way to appeal to the otherwise bored and twitchy, but also a concrete embodiment of pedagogical theories about interactive, student-based learning. Unlike the usual proponents of vague and utopian teaching methods, those intellectually invested in video games feel a sense of inevitability about their project: Games have already outsold the Hollywood box office. According to Suzanne Seggerman, co-director of Games for Change, they will easily worm their way into the academy, just as film did 30 years ago.

"Using video games as a learning tool is newborn, squirmy, and barely formed," she says. "But it's only a matter of time. Talk to me in 10 years. We'll all be playing."

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