

CONTACT: Chris Quigley
Tel: 0845 638 1848
Email: chris@delib.co.uk



www.e-democracy.gov.uk

"Playocracy" : a case study of Demgames

Page 1 of 11

All material within this paper has been funded by the Local e-Democracy National Project and is Crown Copyright 2004. It may only be reproduced with the express permission of the Author. The local e-Democracy National Project is part of an £80m ODPM funded programme to define and deliver local e-Government solutions.



Title: "Playocracy" – democracy games

Background Information

Title:	Demgames
Location:	Nationwide
Primary Sponsor	NorthLincsNet
Organisation:	Delib
Budget:	£64,705
Project Start Date:	01/09/2004
Project End Date:	15/03/2005



Executive Summary

Demgames are a selection of democracy games developed as part of the Local e-democracy National project. Three games were developed as part of Demgames project: Councillor Quest II, Captain Campaign and Money Manager. Each of the games are accessible via a number of different media channels (e.g. the internet, CD-ROM and mobile phones).

Project Rationale and Objectives

The core objectives of the Demgames project were threefold:

to trial the use of computer games in the context of democracy and citizen engagement

to look at how different media platforms can be used effectively to engage different user groups and overcome different democratic challenges (e.g. the digital divide)

to look into future innovations in the context of local democracy and gaming (e.g. customisable functions for Councils)

Background to gaming

Computer gaming is the highest growth sector of the entertainment industry, with an industry growth from \$6 billion in 2000 to \$11 billion in 2004. Because of the diverse number of platforms games are played over and the diverse topics games cover, computer games engage a wider demographic than just "young people", with computer games like Halo being popular amongst 24 – 40 year old males, and interactive TV games like AVAGO (accessed via SKY TV) being popular amongst housewives.

As interaction with games increases in popularity, citizen engagement is on the decrease with 59% voting in the 2001 UK general election.

The lessons that can be learnt from computer gaming in relationship to citizenship engagement are important. The rise in gaming indicates people's movement towards living a more interactive life, and their needs to be engaged and rewarded in new ways. In the "i-society" we live in today, people, especially younger generations, need to click and interact to stay engaged. Civil society is no different to consumer society in this respect.

Gaming and democracy

The playability of interactive games is based upon a number of criteria all of which work together to make a person engage in a game. These criteria can roughly be broken down into the following categories: narrative, goals, rewards, decision-making power, problem solving, learning, the opportunity to win (create a positive outcome), fun and interaction.

These criteria are highlighted in the following matrix of the analysis of the classic 80's video game "Super Mario Land":

Gaming Criteria	Super Mario game element
Narrative	Venture through Super Mario land, avoid the baddies and save the princess!
Goal	Get to the end of the game – and win as many points as possible
Reward	The fun game play and gathering points, lives and super powers
Decision-making power	Decide which character you want to be, which level to do next, how you want to save the princess
Learning / problem solving	Learn where to go and how to save the princess
Opportunity to win	Win points, and save the princess (if you spend long enough on it!)
Fun	The fun graphics and environment in which they play
Interaction	The social element of gaming: e.g. communities joining together to find the secret bonus levels etc.

When we look at these core drivers in relation to computer games and put them in the context of democratic engagement, we can see some useful connections between the two and how gaming techniques (criteria) could be used to improve engagement in local democracy:

Gaming Criteria	Improved citizen participation by using gaming techniques
Narrative	This issue affects your life in this way, you can have your say in these different ways
Goal	To help create better policy, leading to better governance
Reward	To create a better quality of life. To play a role as an active citizen. To learn and understand about issues, resulting in a sense of empowerment.
Decision-making power	To have an input in the democratic process
Learning / problem solving	To learn about the issues that affect your life, and to learn how the democratic process works. To use your own experiences and personal knowledge to help your Local Authority solve local issue problems.
Opportunity to win	Opportunity to see how your input forms part of the policy making process. To engage in constructive discussion with peers and policy-makers.
Fun	Take part in the democratic process in an enjoyable interactive environment.
Interaction	Interaction with peers and policy-makers in an enjoyable online environment.

What was delivered?

As part of the Demgames project, the main outputs were the production of the three games: Councillor Quest II, Captain Campaign and Money Manager. A central games portal "Demgames.org" was also developed to house the games.

Councillor Quest II was designed to help young people understand the day-to-day activities undertaken by Councillors in a fun way. Using computer generated avatars, the player is given the task to choose a character and then face the daily challenges faced by Councillors. This game is accessible via the internet and CD-ROM.

Captain Campaign takes a different perspective on local democracy, giving players the opportunity to investigate the numerous ways in which they can influence the local decision-making process by running a democratic campaign. This game is accessible via the internet and CD-ROM.

Money Manager is perhaps the most innovative of the games, being available to play not only on the internet, but also via mobile phone using Macromedia Flash's new Flashlite technology. In Money Manager players are required to manage the Councils budget for a 10 year period, and allocate resources ensuring a high quality of service and popularity at the same time.

Demgames.org portal and CD-ROM: the Demgames portal and CD-ROM were designed to act as a central portal for all three games, whilst at the same time providing further resources such as Citizenship plans and a competition. The portal itself has a "customize" function that allows Local Councils to create their own specific branded version of the game on a unique URL (e.g. <http://www.demgames.org/northlincs>)

Communication Activity

The games were trialled at a number of public and closed events such as at a school in Winterton, North Lincolnshire.

The distribution plan for the game CD-ROM was such that every local authority in the United Kingdom had an opportunity to receive copies that could be sent out to schools across local regions. Furthermore other education and learning organisations adopted the games as added value for their own resources.

The distribution was complemented by a 'demgames' postcard as well as the usual press releases.

Network operator T-Mobile has been in discussions about hosting the mobile game on their mobile portal.

To sustain interest and generate traffic for the demgames.org site a competition was stated to win a portable gaming device (donated by a large well-known retail chain). The competition consisted of a multiple choice question/answer and tie-breaker. To answer the question citizens must listen to an audio extract from a council webcast, as captured from another part of the local e-Democracy project set.

Successes

The positive feedback from the pilot group indicated that Demgames were successful in their own right. As yet a quantitative study has not been conducted on the impact of the games, however the following statistics have been gathered up-to the end of March 2005:-

Number of customisations (7):-

Chesterfield

Devon

North Lincolnshire

Sedgefield Borough

Staffordshire Moorlands

Stockton Borough Council

Stoke on Trent City Council

Number of unique visitors to www.demgames.org :- 3,131

Page 6 of 11

All material within this paper has been funded by the Local e-Democracy National Project and is Crown Copyright 2004. It may only be reproduced with the express permission of the Author. The local e-Democracy National Project is part of an £80m ODPM funded programme to define and deliver local e-Government solutions.

General Benefits

Academic research has shown that games can be valuable tools in enhancing a number of areas related to democratic participation and citizen engagement:

Increased interest and confidence: the gaming environment encourages people who lack interest or confidence to engage in issues (Klawe 1994)

Enhanced self-esteem: the “user-relevant” gaming environment and easy to understand narrative and instructions help people grow in confidence, and leads to increased self-esteem (Ritchie and Dodge 1992)

Enhanced knowledge acquisition and retention: easily accessible and well presented information leads to enhanced knowledge acquisition (Ricci 1994)

Basis for active involvement and discussion: the interactive and fun environment leads to greater real life interaction and discussion about issues

Increased participation and inclusivity: breaking down the barriers to entry and creating a user-friendly environment leads to greater participation in democracy. Greater inclusivity is also ensured as a result of all the above benefits.

Specific Benefits

- Citizens can start to understand the democratic process at a young age, particularly the choices they have in making changes within their community and the kind of role a council will take to resolve problems
- Citizens will understand that issues are often two sided and that on a number of regional and national levels. The games also link with community tools such as iCan to further action from learning.
- The role of a councillor and public sector employment as a career is highlighted in education sectors
- The games will help citizens understand the complexities, rationale and subsequent outcome of council decisions and subsequent impact through simulation.
- The education / citizenship learning can be implemented in a fun, informative yet challenging way
- Local authorities and government can measure the choices of young people on issues based on choices made within the game

Challenges and limitations

www.e-democracy.gov.uk

In developing the three different games for the Demgames project, our development team faced a number of challenges. The following is a breakdown of the various challenges and considerations:

The role of gaming in democracy: at the outset of a game project it was important to scope the boundaries and expectations of the use of gaming in democracy. It is particularly important to understand the role games play in the democratic process, and how they should act as a part of a bigger “engagement solution”, and not be regarded as a whole solution in itself. For example, in the context of the Demgames project we placed the games in the context of Key Stage 3 Citizenship classes, and as such developed a suite of learning tools to integrate the games into.

Balancing “fun” with learning outcomes: at the heart of each of the games were a set learning outcomes. However, it was key in the design of the games that the learning outcomes did not get in the way of the “fun” of the games. Creating the correct balance between “fun” and learning outcomes is crucial to the success of a democratic game as without a core fun element no one would play the game, and without integrating learning outcomes, the player wouldn’t gain anything positive.

Style and presentation: the look and feel of the gaming environment is highly important in the context of a successful democratic game. Young people are especially critical of how things look, and will react negatively if the game is not designed in a contemporary or cool way. The creation of an environment in which the player is aesthetically engaged with will result in a high level of engagement in the content and messages of the game.

Tone: the tone of the game (linked to the point above) is also an important factor to consider. If the game is patronising to the young players, they will immediately switch off from it. Useful techniques to achieve a good “tone” are the use of humour in the game, together with the use of plain-speaking language.

Reward and feedback: to ensure prolonged engagement in the game, the player must be rewarded at key points throughout the game. These rewards (points) together with feedback will provide an incentive for the player to connect in a more in-depth way with the game and its messages.

Variation of game play and strong narrative: a further way to ensure a high level of engagement in the game is to provide a variety of gaming activities throughout the game, and to ensure that the player knows what the objectives of the game are. Repetition of gaming activities (such as rating / clicking) can lead to the player losing interest. At the same time it is important that a strong narrative helps the player know where he/she is going, and where the end of the game is.

Page 8 of 11

All material within this paper has been funded by the Local e-Democracy National Project and is Crown Copyright 2004. It may only be reproduced with the express permission of the Author. The local e-Democracy National Project is part of an £80m ODPM funded programme to define and deliver local e-Government solutions.

Accessibility: to ensure the game is played by as wide an audience as possible, it is important to make the game accessible in a number of ways:

Format: providing the game in as many modern media formats as possible (e.g. internet, CD-ROM and mobile phone) is important in the context of a fragmented youth media market.

Size: the file size of the game is especially important for distribution via the internet or mobile phone. To keep the file size down to a manageable size, it is important to make a compromise with complex graphics and audio.

Content: a balance between text and graphical content needs to be made to allow all user types to be able to understand the game. The use of icons is particularly useful for players with lower literacy levels.

Acknowledging "gaming life stages": young people are not a homogenous group, and there may be a diversity of levels gaming sophistication, particularly between the sexes. A good understanding of the game's target audience is needed, together with an understanding of the audience's level of gaming sophistication.

Collaboration and community: one of the biggest developments in recent years in the gaming world is the development of collaborative networked games in which players from across the world can play against each other via the internet. Integrating community-based elements to game can increase ongoing engagement with the game. At a basic level "high score charts" provide a sense of community, at a higher level "multi-player" games get people interacting in real time.

The main limitation is that the number of cycles the games can be run before the information becomes repetitive is limited. This can be addressed (see 'next steps').

Lessons learnt and next steps

Based on the lessons learnt through the Demgames project, our team have identified a number of key further innovations that could be implemented in the future to ensure effective citizen engagement:

Live issue database: the “customise” feature on the portal has proved extremely popular, with many Councils around the country choosing to create a version of the game specifically customised to their Council. To build on this success one development idea is to create a “live issue database” that allows Councils to choose which issue they want to customise the game around. For example, if a Council wanted to engage its citizens in the issue of “planning” they could choose to play a “planning” version of the game. Any number of issues could be added to a central database through which Councils could select, and automatically customise for their specific use.

Multi-player gaming: as noted earlier, multi-player gaming is now highly popular with young people playing multi-player games connected via the internet with competitors across the UK and the world. To create a greater ongoing community around Demgames, one idea is to create a multi-player Demgame which allows young people across the UK to play against each other. By creating a multi-gaming model, we would ensure greater engagement in the games and promote a collaborative environment in which young people across the UK could work together to solve local democracy problems in a fun way.

Online gaming competitions: linked to the idea of multi-player gaming, a further idea is to run regular (annual) competitions in which schools / local authorities could compete against each other. These events could run as part of an existing event like Local Democracy Week.

Peer-to-peer distribution: to promote greater awareness of Demgames, better use of “peer-to-peer distribution could be used. Networks could be established using various reward and community-building techniques. These peer-to-peer networks would help build self-sustaining engagement in both the games and democracy.

Additional information and sources

Project sponsors: NorthLincsNet (www.northlincsnet.org)

Further Information: www.e-democracy.gov.uk
www.demgames.org

Contacts: chris@delib.co.uk
fraser.henderson@northlincsnet.org

Author: Chris Quigley (Delib)

Detailed budget:

Activity	Cost
Games 1+2 development	£35,480
Delicery of mobile game (#3)	£16,710
CD-ROM creation	£12,515
Total project budget	£64,705