CivicMAGIC and the rise of serious games

A very serious business

Like most reasonable people, I play board games at Christmas and then forget about them. While wiping the floor with assorted relatives at Trivial Pursuit is by this point an annual ritual, delivering a sort of ersatz and aspartame pleasure, I confess to not thinking much about my successes in the meantime. Shergar. Forrest Gump. Kenya.

Growing up, there wasn't much cultural cache in roleplay and table-top board games. (Sport aside, which was recognisably fine and encouraged.) I remember a secretive Warhammer Club at school, and the leather-clad motorcyclist maths teacher who convened it. I remember specifically the widespread derision it elicited, and the respect afforded to those who orchestrated that derision. A thousand apologies.

Mea culpa. To synonymise these games with an innocent, marginalised nerdery demonstrates not only juvenile cruelty but ingrained myopia. *Serious games* are in vogue. They are distinguished by their capacity to educate, train, and support people, and they are being increasingly deployed in a range of professional settings: schools, offices, universities, hospitals, care homes, even the hallowed halls of political power.

Such games do not simply entertain, the argument goes. They improve leadership, teamwork, deliberations, decision-making. The practice of policy benefits from these forms of interactivity: it allows officials to work through complex scenarios and offer innovative solutions to wicked problems. (It's also worth noting a corporate politics at play: serious games, while not exclusively digital, have been cited as a means of luring workers back to their offices.)

There is an evolving interest from UK Government. In 2022, departments including Defra collaborated with Policy Lab, a unit seeking to improve policymaking using design and people-centred approaches. Together, the group co-designed a game called *Fantasy Farming* that posed a series of hypothetical challenges for decision-makers. One prompt—"Scientists have bred a new type of cow that has gills and can survive underwater!"—gives a flavour of the conundrums that required resolution.

Naming and necessity

Suffice to say, the term "serious games" is something of a misnomer. Insisting on their *seriousness* barely conceals the obvious anxiety: that games are supposed to be fun, ideally silly, and should be undertaken on the pretext of leisure, not labour.

Yet we can intuitively observe the instrumental value of gameplaying, particularly the transferable principles of its architecture: learning, strategy, imagination, empathy, understanding, embodiment.

Matteo Menapace, a games designer who has worked with Defra and Policy Lab, prefers the designation *playable systems*, which he thinks avoids the semantic baggage of the serious and not-so serious. What games can do is give agency to players: they respond to rules, calculate incentives, and decide whether to compete or cooperate.

Yet games can also feel predetermined—which is to say, the game plays you—and in some cases, despite best efforts, everyone dies. That players act against the board is a common thread: success in *Pandemic*, for instance, is very much predicated on collective attempts to save the human species. I think Menapace's thorny account of game-value is compelling because work and play are so frequently elided, and one is seen as a condition for enjoying or fulfilling the other. I also think it brings into focus two misapprehensions about the act of playing, broadly conceived.

One, that games always function as simple entertainment vehicles. There's a reason why "it's only a game!" is such a loaded refrain. Namely, because it often isn't *only a game,* or at least, depending on the levels of participant competitiveness, it doesn't feel like it. Games, especially during acute holiday periods, expose longstanding interpersonal rivalries, subterranean disagreements, and the hardened bigotries of friends and family. It's a special time.

And two, that the professional industries and policy are rarefied worlds of high self-seriousness. Civil servants in government, who must reconcile the simultaneous mundanity and intensity of their roles, uphold collegiality and morale through social activities and corporate contributions. It's on good authority that without collage workshops, pottery classes, music leagues, and deduction games, the machinery of Whitehall would stutter to a halt.

Serious games, across these examples, address not only the intricacies of modern decision-making, but the wider, more disconcerting blurring of contemporary life with work.

CivicMAGIC and games for impact

In the last decade or so, academics have progressively sought to understand serious games in the context of policy, aggregating a range of critical questions, creative resources and lived experiences. The cross-European Serious Games Society was

founded in 2013, Coventry University hosted a Serious Games Institute in 2015, and the University of Warwick published The Serious Games Cookbook only last year.

Now, researchers at University of Southampton are pioneering approaches through the Civic IMAGInation PraCtices project, funded by the Sustainability and Resilience Institute. Led by Vanissa Wanick (WSA), Richard Gomer (ECS), and Kristina Risley (WSA), the project explores how popular table-top role playing games (TTRPGs) like Dungeons & Dragons, as well as original, co-designed efforts such as Empaville, foreground participation and collaboration to tackle everyday challenges.

The CivicMAGIC team has been instrumental in developing the Games for Impact Research Group at the University. This centre seeks to amplify existing work from colleagues, elevating the discourse on serious, applied, and even commercial video games. In doing so, it aims to show how games can become catalysts for social change and behavioural transformation.

Some of this groundbreaking research argues that TTRPGs are not just storytelling platforms but spaces for problem definition, civic imagination, and systems thinking. These insights challenge traditional models of game design, enabling players to navigate the uncertainties, complexities and ethical quandaries of real-world decision-making. This characterisation goes beyond game theory and behaviour modelling: in CivicMAGIC, players co-construct worlds that exist in a constant, undulating state of making and becoming.

These exciting, emerging findings from the CivicMAGIC project suggest a novel method for researchers to engage with policymakers. They can explain why we make bad decisions. They can recommend how we make better decisions. But most pointedly, they refute the supposition that board games are mere vessels for useless knowledge, recited in a dissociated fugue, always, somehow, at four in the afternoon.