Rahman
Age 30

Sittina
Age 26

Elham
Age 14

Poni
Age 13

Jaja
Age 12

Abok
Age 12

Gaming for a Higher Cause

An emerging genre of video games puts social evolution in the palm of your hand

You're standing in the desert with an empty jug in your hands. Rocks, animal carcasses, and small bushes dot the landscape. For a moment, everything is quiet. Then you hear something approaching from the horizon. As the source of the noise becomes visible, you begin running as fast as you can, your tiny knees bouncing high as you hold the jug tight to your chest. The roar of a truck gets louder and louder, and you can now see men with machine guns riding inside. It's the Janjaweed militia, and you're a twelve-year-old Darfurian refugee named Jaja, running to fetch water for your village and running for your life.

Luckily for you (and Jaja), you're only playing a video game. Called *Darfur Is Dying,* the game was created

through the support of MTV and has already been played by nearly one million people. It is just one in a growing genre of "serious games" designed to provide an experience far more meaningful and educational than typical video game fare.

Although serious games have probably been around as long as video games themselves, including everything from games that teach kids algebra to typing tutorials to professional flight simulators, the genre gained a new foothold in public awareness when a slew of games with social activist themes leaped onto the radar of the mainstream media this past summer. During the last week of June, about two hundred game developers, members of the press, and representatives from various activist

organizations, charities, the World Bank, and even the United Nations converged at the third annual Games for Change conference in New York City. Attendees discussed the future of the movement, applauded recent successes, and also raised concerns about the ethical integrity of many seemingly well-intentioned games.

Raph Koster, the designer of some of the world's most popular traditional games (such as the online multiplayer hit *Star Wars Galaxies*), was especially critical of games like *Darfur Is Dying,* which depict real-world humanitarian crises with cartoonish graphics. "Putting this in a game," he said, "begs the questions: How? Why? Can you? Should you? Does a situation like that stand in its horror when you put it in a set of

pixels?" His concerns were undoubtedly shared by others in attendance.

Susana Ruiz, one of the creators of *Darfur Is Dying,* was quick to leap to its defense. "The question is, does this trivialize Darfur?" she said. "Well, I say that doing nothing or saying nothing about the death of people trivializes it even more. Is it a simplification of it? Of course it's a vast simplification. But there's an audience that can approach this and think about Darfur that would never pick up a newspaper article on it."

Games for Change codirector Suzanne Seggerman agreed. "What everyone's realizing is that games are really good at illustrating complex situations," she told the *New York Times.* "And we have so many world conflicts that are at a standstill. Why not try something new? Especially where it concerns young people, you have to reach them on their own turf. You think you'll get their attention reading a newspaper or watching a newscast? No way."

But "young people" clearly doesn't just mean kids. Some of the most sophisticated games, like *A Force More Powerful* and *PeaceMaker,* seem specifically aimed at college-age adults. In *A Force More Powerful,* players learn, through trial and error, every principle of nonviolent strategy imaginable—from staging mass protests to harassing state officials to holding fundraising parties—and must apply these tactics to any number of realistic scenarios, including freeing a political prisoner and ousting a totalitarian regime. One of the consultants to the game's production team, Ivan Marovic, was a cofounder of Otpor, the real-world Serbian youth movement that helped oust Slobodan Milosevic. He says that by playing *A Force More Powerful,* "people will learn certain principles, like why to start with gentler tactics first and move to more aggressive ones only after you have popular support."

In *PeaceMaker,* a strategy game that deals specifically with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, players have the chance to take charge of either side—adopting the role of the Palestinian president or the Israeli

prime minister—and are, naturally, given the challenging task of trying to resolve the conflict. Early tests of players in the Middle East, conducted by Asi Barak, a former Israeli intelligence officer who developed the game as a graduate student along with a team at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, indicate that *PeaceMaker* definitely succeeds in helping players develop a better understanding of why the opposing side behaves as it does.

Of course, the recent surge of interest in serious games comes at a time when popular games like *Grand Theft Auto 3* are coming under fire from parents and politicians for depicting unprecedented levels of realistic violence and sexuality. And there's at least one study, conducted by the University of Michigan, providing clear evidence that, aside from gang membership, no factor among youth predicts violent behavior more than exposure to violent media—especially video games of the first-person-shooter variety. Thus, the move to more educational games might seem like an obvious solution. It may also be what recently inspired MTV's university channel, mtvU, to become a major sponsor of the genre by offering ten $25,000 grants to college students committed to creating games that inspire social and technological change. But good intentions like these won't steer kids from a steady stream of violence if there aren't enough serious games designed specifically *for* kids, or if kids find them too boring to bother with.

That's why a new game slated for release this spring, which boldly blurs the line between popular and serious entertainment, could be the best indicator yet of where video games are headed as a whole. Titled *Spore,* the game puts you in the role of God—or some other all-powerful intelligent

designer—and offers you a single-celled organism to do with as you will. The goal, however, is to create an interstellar empire of intelligent beings, so your prokaryotic protagonist has some serious evolving to do. Created by famed video game designer Will Wright, *Spore* transcends and includes numerous gaming genres with its mind-bogglingly ambitious scope and has already become one of the most eagerly anticipated games since mankind first harnessed electricity. *Spore* definitely isn't as nonviolent as some serious games, since your handcrafted, ever-evolving entities

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constantly devour other creatures and, as they evolve, attack other tribes, fire missiles at other nation-states, and eventually invade whole other worlds. But it's going to convey the concept of evolutionary development like no teaching tool before. Lending tacit support to both Darwinism and intelligent design with its creative combination of evolution by natural selection and consciously directed mutations, it's sure to persuade millions of kids that no matter what actually drives the process, evolution just makes a lot of sense. And if the kids of the near future begin mastering the skill of consciously directing the evolutionary process, it seems that the world of video games—and reality—should be getting better all the time.

Tom Huston