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Global justice or other people's problems? Computer gaming and critical reflection in an international classroom[1]

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Global social justice is often portrayed as a project of either developing appropriate dispositions or of amending the rules that govern global interaction. Despite policy pronouncements by many university vice chancellors on the significance of higher education in contributing to learning about global social justice, there is very little documentation of how university students engage with these aspirations. The paper describes and critically analyses doctoral students' responses to a computer game designed to develop insight into contemporary education and global social justice. Drawing on reflections from teaching the course and student assignments over three years, the paper considers some of the strengths and weaknesses of computer gaming as a learning resource for global justice issues in higher education. It highlights how the format of a game both sets specific boundaries to learning in higher education institutions and also limits the parameters regarding how the conditions of others are apprehended. The extent to which reflecting on computer gaming opens up space for more participatory debates concerning justice remains an open question.

Keywords: global justice; simulation games; international education

In 2000 the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) committed the world to ambitious targets for addressing aspects of poverty and injustice. While more limited in scope than the aspirations expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and lacking concern with some key areas of inequality (particularly participation in decision-making, gender justice and a wider measure of poverty than income), the MDGs, nonetheless, were an attempt to register problems of hunger, lack of health and education as concerns of the whole world, not just of the countries or peoples who suffered these deprivations.

The education components of the MDGs set a number of targets to be met by 2015, which include primary education completed by all children and equal numbers of girls and boys in all levels of schooling and higher education (United Nations 2000). These targets complement the Dakar Programme of Action on Education for All (EFA), adopted by a very large number of governments in 2000, which, called, in addition, for free, compulsory quality schooling, and improvements in adult literacy and early childhood provision (UNESCO 2000).

These declarations entail a vision of global social justice which make particular assumptions about curriculum and approaches to learning and teaching in higher education. If the MDGs and the EFA goals are to be realised, higher education institutions in every country in the world need to produce professionals who can teach in, research and manage national systems for quality education. Further, as the declarations put forward ideas about international collaborations to achieve their goals, they suggest the need for more than just technical skills or understanding of how to implement them, pointing to the importance of investigating and practising new forms of global relationship. The implication of the Millennium Charter or the Dakar Programme are

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that higher education institutions engage with ideas about global social justice, not just in specialist courses about international relations or development studies, but as part of 'core business' in the formation of graduates and professionals. But to date, despite a number of generalised statements by some vice chancellors or commentators on higher education policy that global awareness (often understood not to include a component of social justice) is an important disposition to cultivate in students (Marginson and Sawir 2005; Marginson 2006; Deem 2008) there has been relatively little documentation about what forms of pedagogy might contribute to taking forward the MDG or EFA vision.

This article builds on work in progress on higher education pedagogies and equity cosmopolitanism and global social justice relating to gender and schooling (Unterhalter 2007, 2008a, b) to reflect critically on work in a university based course to develop learning about EFA and global social justice. The first section reviews some of the literature on teaching about global justice in higher education examining rationales, modalities and learner and teacher responses. It considers some of the issues raised by drawing on ICT to support learning and teaching in this area. The second section introduces the background to the case study of a course for doctoral students at the Institute of Education, University of London which included computer gaming to teach about EFA. This analyses student and staff engagements with these resources. The concluding section considers the possibilities of particular pedagogies which might expand insights into global social justice.

Teaching about global social justice in higher education

Teaching about global social justice in higher education institutions has some high level support. The fourth mid term conference of heads of universities, hosted by UNESCO in Thailand in 1997, raised the challenges of global, rather than national or local responsibilities in the organisation of higher education (Neave 1997). While a key World Bank (2000) paper acknowledged the importance of higher education institutions for developing economies, it gave little emphasis to the social justice component of this work. Many universities have seen globalisation as an opportunity to expand market share, rather than consider social responsibility (Marginson and Wazir 2005; Marginson 2006; Wallerstein 2004), but a number of writers have seen openings in universities for discussions of the ethical dimensions of global relations. For many shifts in curriculum and pedagogies in this direction are imperative (Touraine 2000; Roman 2003; Bates 2005; Todd 2007). Amartya Sen (2004) in a discussion of global justice highlights the ways in which this is a collective responsibility in which many institutions have a part to play, while Martha Nussbaum (1997), writing in the context of the USA, argues for liberal higher education to advance a 'cultivation of humanity' through three core values – critical self examination, the idea of world citizenship and the development of narrative imagination. Jane Kenway and Johannah Fahey (2008) give some examples of how this is done. Engaging in dialogue with a number of prominent researchers on globalisation they draw out some key features of a defiant research imagination and consider the ways in which this is developed in work with doctoral students. A number of accounts document how students engage with pedagogies oriented to global justice in specially designated courses or through the initiatives of particular members of staff (Rizvi 2005; Suransky and Manschot 2008; Walker 2006, 70–5). There is, however, to date, no fully documented ethnographic or long-term research study that examines the process of curriculum development, debates about pedagogies, perspectives of learners, teachers, managers, assessment practices, and longer term engagements with global justice issues.

This paper is a contribution to this emerging literature documenting practices associated with teaching for global justice in higher education. In particular it considers possibilities associated with information and communication technologies (ICT) for contributing to this process.

For more than a decade, new technologies have been viewed as a significant resource in raising awareness about global social justice by linking far-flung groups, giving voice to subordinated views and presenting new forms of social organisation that challenge powerful social formations (Ackerley and Okin 1999; Khagram et al. 2002). However, the extent to which they are able to do this given the depth of the digital divide, the concentration of wealth, information and capacity to innovate within a handful of very large corporations, and the potential for surveillance using these technologies, remains hotly contested (Castells 2000). Nonetheless a number of ICT resources have been developed to teach about global justice issues.[2] However there are very few accounts of the extent to which these resources have been adapted for work in higher education, although it is clear from bloggers and web discussions that some resources – for example *A force more powerful* – are being used in higher education classrooms in the US (Members Forum 2006). In 1998 academics at Macquarie University developed an internet based role-play simulation of Middle Eastern politics to teach about negotiation and local contexts (Vincent and Shepherd 1998), but no follow up of student responses was made. However, the potential for learning from experience through this kind of initiative has been noted as a significant benefit of learning on line (Alexander and Boud 2001). A number of accounts of similar resources developed for teaching political science and international relations focus on the intentions of game design and desired student capacities (Linser and Naidu 1999; Asakawa and Gilbert 2003), but the complexity of what happens in the actual process of using interactive resources like this to teach about negotiation or power imbalances is not generally documented.

In contrast to the limited investigations of university students engagements with simulations concerned with international development or global justice, an interesting literature on computer gaming with school age children has looked at the identities formed and negotiated by gamers and the forms of literacy and learning this entails (Carr et al. 2006; Selfe and Hawisher 2007). But the worlds of learning considered are generally the immediate world of game players' social relations – friends, family, schools. While this is understandable, to some extent, given the age of the young gamers studied, the analysis gives few hints regarding their consideration of more national or global issues. However, it is clear that computer games develop learning in particular ways and the form of experience is not simply controlled by the material designers.

Foucault has written about the range of economic, cultural and social capital we deploy, where games of truth and error become constituted as experience (Foucault 1985). Thus particularly crafted games created to enhance learning on global justice for example, engage with and reconfigure experience in particular formations. David Buckingham (2006) in looking at children engaged in computer gaming draws on an analysis made by Jesper Juul (2005), pointing out that there is a difference between games and play. Juul notes games are based on rules, have variable quantifiable outcomes, assigning each different values (both positive and negative). Players are required to invest effort to achieve a desired outcome and to relate emotionally to what happens. Thus games have negotiable consequences for real life. But, as Buckingham argues, while there are limits set to what is possible with regard to the rules, there are many different ways of playing the game. Thus multiple meanings are made and the boundaries between the game world and the real world may be porous. It is the nature of this boundary and the form of learning that is negotiated there, that is particularly important to examine in understanding the space ICT resources in particular, and higher education classrooms in general, might afford for learning about global justice.

Computer gaming and critical reflection in an international classroom

In trying to examine the ways in which students draw on particular 'rules of the game' in trying to understand global justice this section reflects on forms of practice deployed in using an online

computer resource for this purpose. *Classroom challenge* was designed to introduce students to a critical engagement with questions of education and global justice. It was developed in 2004 as part of the international education doctorate (Ed.D.) at the Institute of Education, University of London. The degree was designed for students who worked in international education, but also enrolled a number who were deemed 'international' because they did not live in the UK. Delivered through intensive periods of face-to-face teaching, followed by study support from teachers, fellow students and administrators via email, post and telephone, the course combines taught courses with in-depth original research. A minimum of five years' professional experience on top of masters level qualifications is required for entry.

International education was an optional course in the degree, designed, according to the first course handbook to:

> … encourage you to think about issues raised for education as a site of professional practice by different understandings of 'the international', and to the range of meanings associated with the idea of 'comparison'. The course is particularly concerned with aspects of global inequalities as they manifest themselves in education and considers a range of professional responses to these that encompass education in its broadest sense, agencies, national governments and educationists themselves. (International Ed.D., 2002)

There was an explicit concern with global social justice in this overview and this was a theme of many of the lectures, presentations and seminars. However, in the first years of the course, students, despite an interest in these topics displayed during class discussion, wrote assignments on the area which formed the topic for their Ed.D. research. Thus, for example, a student researching early childhood education in America wrote the essay for *International education* on this theme, while a student working on English teaching in Japan followed this topic in the coursework essay. There was thus nothing concerned either with comparative perspectives or global justice in the writing required from the first cohorts of students.

In 2003 the course team was challenged by an external examiner to consider what made the international EdD international, other than that the students came from a wide range of different countries. In reflecting on this, the staff decided to make critical engagement with discussions of global social justice more central to the assessment process for the international education course. Up to that date a learning activity about EFA using a board game and discussion about implementation had accompanied some lectures. It was decided in 2004 to adapt this as a computer game and require all students, as part of their assessed work, to write a critical commentary on the game and its assumptions. This writing forms one half of the assignment for *International education*, the second half of which is a conventional essay on a topic chosen in conjunction with a tutor. This shift in assessment was accompanied by attempts to make the range of ideas the course was dealing with much more explicit. Thus the order of sessions was reorganised, and a particular set of framing ideas for the course was developed that attempted to offer an interplay between theory, biography and practice. Through an iterative process over some years reflecting on student responses in written work and discussion, the team changed the moment at which the game and the accompanying assessment task was introduced and developed.

A first version of the game *Classroom challenge* was developed with money from a teaching excellence award in 2004 and in 2005 a further grant led to the game being revised and developed on the basis of students' feedback. Part of the assessment task thus became:

> Develop a strategic reflection on the 'world view' implicit in **Classroom challenge** (the Education for All game). Make some concrete suggestions drawing on relevant literature or your professional experience about an alternative way to frame this game. (International Ed.D. 2004)

This amendment of the assessment task meant that all students taking the course would be required to think about an aspect of global justice as portrayed in *Classroom challenge* and to

reflect critically on the rules that shaped the game, the process of playing the game in class, and the ways in which the game did or did not connect with their real life experiences. It would thus make the degree not just organisationally international, but also help orient the curriculum for all students towards international concerns and provide a platform for key professionals to articulate ideas in this area. It therefore invited students to problematise both their professional experience and some of the assumptions about truth, error, economic, social and cultural capital expressed in the game. We intended that some of the theoretical resources provided through studying debates relating to comparative education and global justice would allow students to go below the surface in exploring these questions. The boundary between rules and game play was precisely what we wished students to examine in order to deepen understanding of the international and forms of global connection.

The rules for *Classroom challenge* (as amended in 2005) described its rationale as:

> … a computer game designed to help students reflect on how the world might together deliver on a range of commitments made to achieve Education for All… According to UNESCO statistics 855 million people in the world (one sixth of the population) have no access to schooling. Two thirds of these are women and girls. … The extent of the problem of huge numbers of people denied education and the very slow rate of global response is a matter of grave global injustice which this game is designed to help you think about, both analytically and in relation to a range of professional responses. (Crawford and Unterhalter 2005, 1)

Two aims for the game were made explicit in the rules:

> The aim of the game is to enable students to reflect on some of the decisions governments and those who work with them have to take in order to achieve EFA, some of the obstacles in their path and some of the alliances they can build. It is thus partly a simulation game looking at different kinds of countries and the EFA challenge. A second aim of the game is to prompt students to think critically regarding the 'rules of the game' globally, and nationally the ways in which these are represented in this game, and whether there are more accurate or more desirable rules. (Crawford and Unterhalter 2005, 2)

In *Classroom challenge* students are randomly assigned to play the role of a key decision-maker in the Department of Education in one of five types of country trying to achieve EFA and the education components of the MDGs by 2015. These:

> … are loosely based on aspects of the real countries with that name, but we want to stress that for example Kenya in the game is not a simulation of the situation the real Kenyan government faces, but an example of some of the challenges facing a country with some features of education and society evident in Kenya. (Crawford and Unterhalter 2005, 2)

Five types of country were identified in the game design phase using measures of human development and education provision drawing on UNDP, UNICEF and UNESCO statistics:

- A country with low human development, difficulties in accumulating income and wealth, huge regional divisions, fragile and unevenly dispersed education provision.
- A country with low human development, some good but uneven education provision and many instances of active popular mobilisation to improve education.
- A country with middle levels of human development, some very good and some inadequate education provision, considerable regional diversity and inequality, and high levels of popular mobilisation to demand education.
- A country towards the top of the medium human development range, with generally good provision of primary education, and some challenges with regards to quality and equality.
- A country with historically high levels of provision under a Communist government, currently through free market policies suffering economic difficulties and some decline in education provision.

In the game all five are trying to reach EFA by 2015, but they start from different places and have differential resources in curriculum, teaching, school conditions and learning materials. Some difficulties relate to the situation the government of each country faces in 2005, when the game begins, some result from the success or failure of improvements the players try to effect, some are randomly generated by the changing global economic situation, and others by unforeseen events, represented each turn by a chance card, which brings benefits or drawbacks (Crawford and Unterhalter 2005, 3). In playing the game students can make improvements to the education system, but have to consider whether they can pay for these and sustain the reforms. They can also try to reform the process of discussion, decision-making, community involvement and commitment to equality, but existing historical conditions constrain or facilitate this. There are various mechanisms for drawing on financial or technical resources from other countries. At the end of the game a log allows them to see how far they have come towards EFA and how they have fared in relation to the other countries playing the game.

Students have one introductory session and then, after an opportunity to acquaint themselves with the rules, play the game in teams. A whole class debriefing session allows for discussion of the game in relation to plans for the assignment and a wrap up session for the whole *International education* course gives a further opportunity to review the game in relation to the different approaches to thinking about 'international education' the course has suggested. In addition students have individual tutorials on the assignment and get detailed feedback on a draft. It can thus be seen that the online resource has become a key component of the course and one of the reference points against which the students are encouraged to examine the wider range of reading and discussion they undertake.

Student engagements with *Classroom Challenge*

Students enrolled on the international Ed.D. come from every continent, range in age from early 30s to late 50s and comprise approximately half women and half men. Some have positions of considerable seniority in schools, international organisations, or as freelance consultants, while others have had more experience of day-to-day teaching. Reflecting on engagements with the online resources I draw in this section partly on my own observations of working with successive cohorts since 2004 and partly on discussions with fellow course team members.

Working with students playing the game, I have been struck by three types of response. By far the majority of students are very involved, come to identify with the country they are playing, and become angry, frustrated or puzzled when education reform does not proceed as they consider it should. They animatedly discuss events in the game amongst themselves and with the rest of the class. Here what seems to be emerging is a process where students scaffold each other's learning through discussion and pooling expertise, somewhat in the fashion that Burn and Carr (2006) observed in on line gaming communities. At this moment of learning there is a blurring of the boundaries between the rules of the game and the process of game play. It seems that at this juncture the social obligations of being 'good students' elicit a response where the experience of the game legitimates the rules it represents.

However, I have also noted two disengaged positions. The first is associated with some (but not all) students with considerable technical expertise in computer programming, online education, or simulations. These hold themselves aloof from the classroom activity, apparently because they are irritated by aspects of the way the computer programme runs, the limitations in the now quite static 'feel' of the game and its layout. This position is different to that of 'expert' and 'owner' noted by Scott and Kambouri (2006) in adolescent boys' computer gaming where the 'expert' is a particularly engaged participant. Although these students position themselves as experts with regard to ICT, they, on the whole, do not share their expertise, and do

not take ownership of the aspirations of the game or the gameplay amongst their peers. It appears that for these students that the social networks of computing or online education trump the alternative networks amongst students learning about global justice constituted in the classroom.

A different type of disengaged expert position manifests itself among some (but not all) students who work in or with education ministries which face some of the challenges of EFA the game deals with. A typical response from this group is that they know the problems entailed in putting decisions into practice. The game for them is not new and its larger global justice concerns are less pressing than the all too familiar scenarios it presents. For these students the mediated agency, which Schott (2006) notes characterises game play, gets in the way. Learning, in their view, should be further away from day-to-day reality; the social obligations of professional practice need to be pushed further away to enable a larger picture of games of truth and error to become discernible.

Some further insight into forms of student engagement are evident in assignment writing. Sixty commentaries on the game, written between 2004 and 2007, were anonymised and analysed under broad thematic headings. The analysis made was discussed with members of the teaching team and shared with students who participated in the course. As the aim of this paper has been to establish some broad areas for discussion with regard to teaching and learning about global social justice, extracts from student writing quoted below have not been identified with a particular cohort or range of student profiles.

Three broad sets of issues emerged from the students' writing. The first concerns the extent to which the game and the process of playing the game as a learning activity does or does not reflect what is written about putting EFA into practice or bringing about education change. This theme talks to issues about higher education as a differentiated site of learning from professional practice. It positions a particular boundary for classrooms, learning resources and computer gaming with regard to learning about the real world of global justice. The second theme concerns critical engagements with the epistemology and values of 'playing' a game with such weighty matters and highlights problematic assumptions the game makes, against which the students can establish quite 'comfortable' critiques. The third theme raises problems concerned with a pedagogy of learning about other people's problems and questions whether a simulation game concerned primarily with resource accumulation gives sufficient insight into the complexity and discomfort of the narratives required to develop dispositions concerned with global justice.

The question of realism

A recurrent theme through much student writing was that the game was realistic It reflected how richer countries, with access to money and skill, could more easily achieve EFA than those 'with the greatest need'. The game thus mirrored the injustices of current global inequalities and the grave consequences of not achieving EFA in the poorest countries:

> The random and unexpected windfall for one country versus the continued struggles of another country seems to ignore the fact that there ought to be a more thoughtful method of dispersing excess funds for the purpose of achieving the goal. This definitely calls into question 'who' makes the decisions about funding, 'how' the money is being regulated, and 'what' might be a more sensible way of ensuring an important target such as education for all, does not become 'just a game' in the real world.

The game was deemed realistic in the difficulties it presented in achieving education reforms or in ensuring that changes in education provision translated into improving the prospect for EFA. Many students commented on the frustration of not being able to effect the reforms that

made good sense: '[Although]… we made a specific choice… we lacked enough wealth or reform points for anything else. Perhaps the inadequate amount of wealth and reform capability mirrors real life'.

Others highlighted how the technology of the computer game mirrored the process of putting plans into action in organisations:

> One of the frustrations I found playing the game is that once you have clicked on an action, you cannot undo it but, on the other hand, this models well reality… the frustration felt by players of the EFA Game in being constrained amongst other areas by the limited range of actions available, the time-frame by when something needs to be done, models well the real world

The ways in which the global processes depicted with regard to financing or assessing reform or attending to injustice failed to take adequate account of the needs of those in particular countries struck a chord with regard to management regimes and professional lives in very different contexts:

> Whilst playing the game, it became apparent to me that I could draw an imperfect parallel between the countries in the EFA game, and the institution in which I work. Although my [work] setting provides an environment where the material resources are second to none, there is little investment in the human resource… A dictatorial regime leads to the staff feeling disempowered, 'de-skilled' and lacking in any autonomy. This results in a reluctance to use initiative or creativity.

But for all the students who felt the game was realistic with regard to what they had read about EFA or their own experiences of education reform, there were as many who felt the game was unrealistic. Amongst reasons given were that it failed to model all the complexity of the relations between governments, civil society and international donors. It did not take account of salient factors such as natural disasters, war, dramatic changes in government, the interconnections between health and education, regionalism, differential planning for urban and rural education provision, or the consequences of improved gender equality in school, improving women's lives and gender equality in a society. One suggested children from countries in the game should be set a test periodically like TIMS or PISA as these important ways in which education reform is assessed were missing from the information available to game players. Another pointed out the lack of detail on the quality, as opposed to the amount, of teacher education.

Some students felt that the flexibility of the game with regard to the outcome of a particular action did not enhance learning. (In the game the outcome of actions depends on a complex interplay between prevailing context, the levels of participation in decision-making and chance). In their view the game should relate more directly to what is known through research about different experiences of putting policy for EFA into practice:

> Topics that require the player to choose between the most beneficial or the least harmful, such as hiring more untrained teachers or fewer trained ones, teaching a local curriculum in a stigmatised minority language or in the majority language give the player the experience of making difficult decisions, and it would have the advantage of bringing the readings to life…

The extent to which the game is or is not like real life or could ever be so, raises issues about the boundaries between education institutions as sites of teaching and learning and professional practice as a site of learning and action. It can be seen that for students who felt the game was realistic and unrealistic what was salient was the ways in which it confirmed or failed to confirm what they had read or experienced. Thus the very process of reflection in an environment that is constructed and not natural seems an important part of teaching to think about global justice. The boundary between professional practice and study – established through lectures, seminars, reading and the artificiality of the computer game with its attendant commentary – seems to assist consideration of global justice understood in somewhat conventional terms as a

set of historical problems for which there are reasonable solutions. The distance offered through the mixture of realism and critical reflection on the rules of the game seems to offer an opportunity to address the differentiation between sites of learning, but it does not seem to go beyond familiar ways students use other learning resources to confirm or expand ideas and experience.

Global justice as a game with rules?

For all the students who appreciated the ways in which the game modelled reality, there were many who were frustrated by the notion of a 'game' and the ways in which the rules omitted many key concerns. A number wrote that the metaphors used in the texts of the game concerning competition and challenge obscured understandings of justice:

> By using the very words 'challenge' and 'game' they [the designers] appear to be inviting low-income, third world countries to compete against each other for scarce resources with which to improve their education systems. Why would any one of the countries grant aid to another if it meant that the recipient might 'win' the game to the detriment of the donor?

This phrasing it was suggested actually undermined any understanding of justice: 'The EFA game is game with a winner. In reality, EFA is not about competing with other countries. It is about global social justice'.

A number of students felt that the process of playing when one cannot win had demotivating effects with regard to thinking about global justice:

> … unlike other 'games' everyone does not start in the 'same place'… It almost seems inevitable as to who the 'winner' of the game will be from the start, which leads one to question what the value of the game is, other than to point out the inequities. Further, the game requires weaker members to rely on stronger members to help them achieve their goals… the novelty of the game wears off quickly when it seems that there is little chance of reaching the target. What begins with hope and motivation quickly turns to disillusionment and indifference

These aspects of a game with a particular worldview were precisely what the course team had hoped students would develop the capacity to criticise, and a number of cogent comments were made of the limited ways in which the game represented the process of discussion and dialogue. Written into the rules of *Classroom challenge* is an assumption than more participation by communities, public discussion and enlarging freedoms will improve the chances of attaining EFA by 2015. This is represented in the game by the political culture modifier. If political culture increases reforms have a better chance of taking effect. Thus the game attempts to express in limited ways an approach to global justice drawing on the capability approach with its stress on democratic deliberation (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000) that students study as a key element in the course. However, a common criticism is that the game fails to give any space for listening to the voices of those engaged with EFA. While the political culture modifier is available as a reward for increasing discussion and participation, there is no space in the gameplay to consult teachers, children, parents, administrators or voters and respond to their concerns outside the narrow parameters set by the rules of the game. One student remarked: 'democratic characteristics are under-represented in the game. Our group quickly concluded that the only asset we had were our people, yet we could neither hear nor ask them'.

One student remarked that despite the team's knowledge of the importance of improving political culture a managerialist approach to pressing through with set reforms prevailed:

> … the team acted in the proud tradition of a ruling junta which was able to make short-, medium- and long-term decisions, safe in the knowledge that nothing as inconvenient as a democratic election was going to derail its plan even if it failed.

These pertinent critical comments indicate some students' appreciation of the importance of discussion and dialogue in thinking about global social justice, but this was by no means a widespread view, and it appears that the catchall action of 'improve political culture' available every turn the game was played did not seem to open up reflection on how this might happen and what the constraints on this in the game design were.

A further perennial criticism has been that the game fails to make culture a concern of global justice. This takes a number of forms. One is that the game models only the improvements in relation to culture that are written about through western scholarship:

> … the game is probably not very culture-specific, as it promotes the same image of all people. Although individual improvements address issues such as 'inclusiveness' and 'language', there may be more adequate, culture-specific ways to address relevant problems, though they may not yet have been discovered in Western literature.

A second form of the cultural critique is that there is an assumption in the game that the cultures associated with education are superior to the cultures associated with lack of education:

> The assumption here is that by *furnishing* teaching, materials, schools, and curriculum, improved education will naturally follow. I believe the assumption is rooted in a western view of how education is to be 'delivered', the student remarkably absent from the equation… Are we *sure* that our noble goals are considered noble across cultures? Can a contrary value espoused by a teacher trump a value held by a culture for generations? How do we convince students to stay in school when the message in the street is that dropping out is 'cool'? Can there be any winners when classroom culture and local culture clash head-to-head?'

Inherent in these critiques is the perception that the game suggests a particular form of global justice that ignores local contexts.

These criticisms are in a way at an opposite pole to those commentaries that appreciated the game for its realism or the space it provides to consider practice. These comments do not point to ways in which the game could be enhanced by adding particular features, but question the very rationale of a game, the assumptions about truth it presents and the ways in which particular experiences are valued above others. In making these comments, these students suggest that the online resources provide a position against which students can define themselves, work out their own view of global justice and thus situate themselves more reflectively and critically.

Learning through other people's problems

But whether students take a position of appreciating or questioning the game, the issue remains as to whether this form of resource takes them beyond conventional patterns of learning and discussion. The depth of the global inequalities the course deals with constantly confront the staff with difficulties in how both to depict and organise insight. Making connections to the lives of the poorest people in the world is particularly difficult in a classroom where virtually all students and staff associate largely with elites, and have very little knowledge of poverty and lack of education. We all, despite our professional positions, have only fragmentary insight into the range of political and economic practices associated with enacting global justice.

Commenting on playing the game many students echoed my observations as a teacher of the significance of the 'dynamic' discussions between classmates. But a number highlighted that the procedures of the game were 'mechanical' in that you take an action and it has a consequence, for which there is a rationale (even though some of this is random). Some suggested the need to introduce a more flexible approach to rule making, as is now possible given new virtual worlds in gaming. Others wondered about different modes of interaction, not just with the countries playing the game and fellow classmates. However, over and above developing potential for new

internet interactivity, there is a problem about the 'flatness' of the human relationships presented. Some students suggested the need to help players build 'emotional involvement' through knowledge of 'the human factor in the country they are assigned to' in order to develop 'more hope and optimism than is currently possible'. Approaches to building this involvement were suggested through giving players more definite roles (timekeeper, recorder, process monitor), or allowing students to build their own country profile, thus allowing them to play in relation to scenarios they knew well. A number commented that improvements should provide ongoing access to relevant information as each turn of the game progressed, or the chance to research different approaches to reform between turns.

This extract combines many of these suggestions:

> In multi-player mode: 'in an effort to keep the players emotionally committed and to maintain the 'human angle' by the players themselves, they could be involved by having to draw on their own experiences and specialisms. The game could contain a 'wild card' where a player, or team, is sent off (either separately or together) to consult verbally with other countries (they would be given a consultancy 'brief' in order to ensure they were adequately informed). Some gain could be awarded to both parties if the recipient country demonstrated an increased competency in a particular skill or achievement as a result.

It can be seen that the position of professional with access to information, reflection from experience, clearly delimited terms of reference for actions, and awareness of enlarging professional insight are seen by students as very important prerequisites for acting effectively in support of EFA and global justice. The imaginative repertoire they use does not use tropes inflected by sensibility of the shame of lack of education, the pains of hunger or illness, or outrage at the inequalities of global maldistribution. In this they confirm Kenway and Fahey's assertion that a defiant research imagination, which invites radical ruptures with present ways of understanding globalisation is not being produced by much current doctoral training (Kenway and Fahey 2008).

On the one hand one can argue that this is a drawback of the learning associated with *Classroom challenge*. It does not give students access to the real life consequences of failing to provide EFA by 2015. It provides understanding only within already well-established rules of professional practice, and to the extent that students become emotionally involved with game play, it is with their own experiences as players not with the experiences of teachers, managers, parents or students in the countries struggling to achieve EFA.

On the other hand one must pose the question whether the sensibilities cultivated by narratives of hardship or the depth and complexity of social situation will improve professional engagement. The critics of globalisation interviewed by Kenway and Fahey (2008) spoke of their pedagogic practice with doctoral students as encouraging uncomfortable thought, examining unexamined habits and striving for complexity. Members of the course team on international education would probably concur that they share these aspirations. The invitation to critique the worldview and the form of the rules in *Classroom challenge* is an instance of encouraging deep questioning. But it appears that the pedagogical resources offered by computer gaming may be inadequate to shift deeply established professional personae that are concerned with distance, information, and appropriate action. On the basis of the student writing analysed it appears that work over one term and critical engagement elicited through playing the game does not give enough scope for reasoned reflection on how best to understand not only the scale of the difficulty of achieving EFA but also the depth of the personal consequences of not doing so. Thus the very rule bound environment of the computer game appears too restrictive a format to cultivate some of the human engagements required by the challenges of global social justice. Identifying the games of truth and error elicits complex and considered writing, but may not be a profound enough learning experience to build deep commitments with regard to global justice.

Conclusion

This examination of computer gaming as a modality for teaching global social justice to post-graduate students suggests possibilities and drawbacks. By constructing the artificial boundaries of an invented world bounded by rules and inviting criticism of this, the game encourages students to develop a point of view through which to read academic commentaries and reflect on their own experiences. However the form of connection is strongly mediated through professional identities. This may well be an important disposition to develop. But the dispositions of professionalism may be too dispassionate given the severity of global injustices. It appears that computer gaming is too distancing a format to cultivate humanity to the depths required by contemporary inequalities and that additional complementary pedagogies are required.

Notes

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2. At the time of completing this paper in December 2008 more than 50 interactive online games dealing with issues of global justice were available on the web, compared to only two when the first version of the paper was prepared in June 2007.

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