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Home > Industry News > [MIGS 2010: A Call For 'Positive Play', Games That Create Gains](#)

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### MIGS 2010: A Call For 'Positive Play', Games That Create Gains [11.08.10]



At a Gamasutra-attended panel at the Montreal International Game Summit 2010, a panel gathered to talk about the gaming's potentially positive aspects by showing their work, chewing on deep questions about the state of the industry, and generally pushing buttons.

The panel comprised Genevieve Lord, director of Champlain College of Vermont's Montreal campus, Alex Hutchinson, a creative director at Ubisoft Montreal, Ann DeMarle, director of the Emergent Media Center at Champlain College, Dante Anderson, general manager and head of games at serious games shop Seriosity, and consultant David Edery, who also recently co-founded studio Spry Fox.

Lord started the discussion off by explaining the aims of the "Positive Play" SIG, which lent its name to the talk.

Lors said the SIG is focused on promoting the positive aspects of games to counteract those talking about negative aspects of games, and on challenging developers to include more positive content in games. She reminded the audience that "positive impact games are not [necessarily] non-violent games."

#### Real-World Examples

DeMarle talked about her work creating a game designed to help end violence against women around the world, created on behalf of the UN. "Most programs focus on helping victims, but the UN has identified that violence against women is a true driver of poverty -- which affects both men and women," she said.

The game, then, was designed to target boys aged 9 to 14, to help shape their thinking before they were in a position to abuse. The team identified soccer, the most popular sport in the world, as a good theme for a game which had to be deployed globally. The title that resulted, *Breakaway*, has been distributed widely -- including at the World Cup -- and has been played a great deal.

Seriosity, on the other hand, is aiming at creating games that reward people in menial jobs for their hard work. This includes people who work at call center positions, which Anderson called a "low paid, terrible job," and noted that "there's very little money in making sure people are happy" from a business angle. He believes putting game-like structures over these employees' work can "give them recognition for the stuff that they've done."

Edery brought up several examples of using crowdsourcing -- including Microsoft's Beta1 and Beta2 programs for Windows Vista, which created

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leaderboard systems internally at the company to reward employees for beta-testing the OS.

"Almost overnight, participation in the dogfood [beta] program quadrupled," said Edery. A newer game launch internally has asked Microsoft staffers to check localized text. Employees are "happy to do it because they're getting points," Edery said.

The *Google Image Labeler* game is a fun two-player game in which the two participants help the company identify photos. "When you both say 'tree' there's a good chance there's a tree in the image, and that's more information than Google had before."

There's also a protein folding game called *Foldit*, in which people with good spatial abilities help fold proteins -- presented as a game -- and while it's not popular with many people, some love it so much they keep coming back. "These people are at this point saving the university, they're estimating, millions of dollars," said Edery.

Of course, crowdsourcing and game-like behavior can also be exploited. A Russian hacker used nude photos of women to entice users to fill in Captcha data from legitimate sites to get access to them, Edery warned.

But that doesn't mean these game-like structures shouldn't be used for other purposes. "The people who are playing [*Foldit*] are having fun and they're helping medical researchers," Edery said. "Like any powerful tool, you can use it for good, you can use it for evil. We can ignore it and find that the only people who are using it are the casinos and they're using it against us, or we can use it for good."

#### **Joining the Cultural Conversation**

The discussion of meaningful content in games came up in reference to EA's decision to yank the Taliban out of *Medal of Honor*. Unfortunately, said DeMarle, "it almost seems like [the game industry is] afraid to embrace culture, it's afraid to say 'we affect or impact culture.'" She said she would like to "push the game industry to make things that have impact culturally."

Said Hutchinson, "For a long time 'fun' has been the only metric of success in video games ... but I see a lot of movies that I don't think are fun, but I think are very valuable."

Unfortunately, said Edery, "it's already incredibly hard to make a fun game. Layer on the idea that it has to have a positive impact? That makes it exponentially harder."

However, he said, "the film industry, the book industry, they decided a long time ago that they believe in their power to make change... it should be the same with games."

#### **Not From Big Companies?**

Edery noted that positivity doesn't need to be the focus of the game to have an impact. "To make an impact, and do the kinds of things we're talking about here... You can make something that's a wonderful game and that's really compelling and have just 2 percent of it be serious. And the 2 percent serious could be more impactful than all of the games are 100 percent serious put together, if you do it right."

However, he warns, "the fact of the matter is that you're not going to see leadership from big publishers on this front. Look at free-to-play. The writing was on the wall." With social gaming, as well, it took too long for companies like EA and Disney to acquire social gaming developers, and they had to do it at hefty prices, he said. Even that decision-making process was delayed, "and that's when money's on the line."

"Where [positive content in games] is going to come from is someone in this audience who's a game designer who realizes there's a way to do something special and builds it into their game in a way that marketing won't find offensive."

Anderson noted that mainstream game companies are happy to push boundaries when money is involved. Take Rockstar, he said: "When they're

going to the edge of taste -- where Hollywood has gone way beyond -- they're doing it for money."

### **Lessons Taught. But Not Explicitly**

Lord noted that games engender behavior that might not be as possible in other contexts -- like farming in MMOs. "There is a time when you are busy farming, and you are just doing the same repetitive task... I have heard comments that you wouldn't do this if you were paid to do it," she said.

On a more positive note, high-level *World of Warcraft* play is so challenging and has such a complex interface that it shows that skills can be taught by games. "You have all of those icons, and you can use them in a second without thinking. If it were your job, and you were asked to do this in a stressful situation, you would complain. But because you were taken through a curve, that is how you can move through a number of tasks successfully."

Lord also observed that not all positive aspects of games have to relate to narrative or play content. "There's a large component of positivity from games in terms social activity," she said. "Kids who have difficulties, as long as they play, they can speak about games. Even outside of content games have changed the ways kids interface with each other, and we can't underestimate that."

She also shared an amusing anecdote about how her son was taught a lesson by *Fable*: "We were playing it, and my son went to bed in *Fable*, and woke up with a baby, and he came to breakfast and said 'You know, in real life, I'll never forget to put a condom.' And when I met Peter Molyneux, I told him, and said 'I love you.'"

By Christian Nutt  
November 8, 2010 07:19:00 PM PT

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