

What Works

Child's Play: A video game teaches children about famines and how to stop them. By Sheryl Nance-Nash

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Child's Play

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With children in developed countries spending much of their free time watching TV, sending instant messages, and playing video games, they don't have a lot of bandwidth left for thinking about the developing world's problems.

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) decided that the best way to educate kids about global hunger was to use a medium that already had their attention: the video game. "If we don't initiate projects that will interest children, not only will we lose the war [on hunger], but so will future generations," says Justin Roche, marketing manager for the WFP's Food Force project.

The Rome-based WFP is the largest humanitarian agency in the world, helping to feed 113 million people in 80 countries last year. Despite its efforts, more than 800 million people worldwide are chronically hungry. WFP wants to halve that number by 2015 – a goal that has inspired the agency to think seriously about how to engage children in the fight against global hunger.

The WFP initially thought about commissioning an educational CD-ROM. But in the late '90s, a press officer in Italy named Paola Biocca came up with the idea of developing a video game. Worldwide sales of video games were well on

their way to the \$25.4 billion record established last year. And research was showing that children were giving up TV in favor of video games.

Biocca died in a 1999 plane crash en route to Kosovo, but her vision of a video game about world hunger lived on. In April 2005, WFP released Food Force, a free, downloadable game (www.food-force.com) that teaches children about the causes of hunger and what they can do about them.

Trailblazing on a Budget

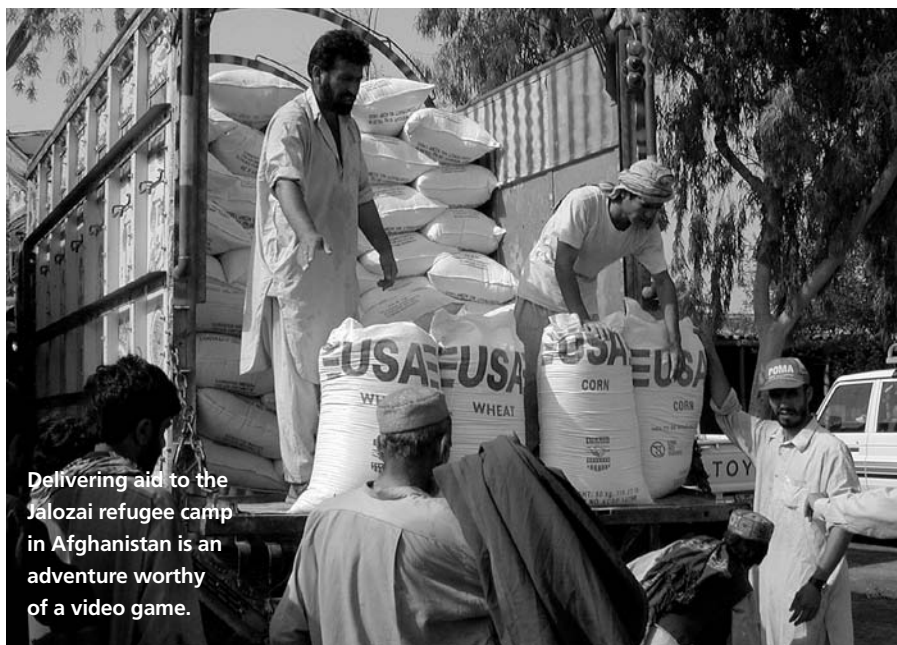
The challenges along the way to launching the video game were tremendous, says Trevor Rowe, a New York-based spokesman for the WFP. The agency knew of no other non-governmental organizations that were using video games to teach children about social issues, and was nervous about blazing the trail.

The agency asked itself, "How could we make something relevant [and] interesting that would resonate in the whiz-bang video culture?" Rowe recalls. "We went through several permutations, thinking we would do something purely educational. We realized that might work for the schoolteachers, but it wouldn't be something the kids would turn to voluntarily."

The WFP first sent a list of requirements to 10 video game developers. The game had to be realistic and educational, and it had to showcase how WFP workers overcome obstacles like difficult terrain, warfare, and floods. It also had to be acceptable to the United Nations' diverse membership. "We didn't want to offend anyone," Rowe says.

WFP then chose a Rome-based company, Deepend. Although developing a commercial game typically costs millions of dollars, Deepend's bid came in under \$400,000 – the amount WFP had to spend. The agency also kept costs down by involving WFP staff members in the game's development, including scriptwriting and storyboarding.

Without spending lots of money on advertising or celebrity promotion, Food Force is broadly distributed. "We got



Delivering aid to the Jalozai refugee camp in Afghanistan is an adventure worthy of a video game.



Food Force characters race against the clock, transporting food to remote and dangerous locales.

interest from parents and teachers because it was educational and nonviolent, a good alternative to some of the games out there, and once the kids checked it out, they fueled the interest,” says Margaret Carrington, WFP’s press officer.

Let the Game Begin

Targeted to children ages 8 to 13, the game contains six different missions for children at six different levels of playing ability. In a race against time, players must feed thousands of hungry people on the fictitious island of Sheylan. They pilot helicopters while looking for hungry people, negotiate with armed rebels blocking a food convoy, and use food aid to help rebuild communities. They win points for fast and accurate play and good decision making.

Each mission begins with a briefing by a Food Force character who explains the challenge ahead. The character then returns at the end of each mission to present an educational video about how WFP responds to actual food emergencies.

Although the subject matter is serious, even depressing, “it’s not a hand-wringing exercise that makes children feel guilty,” Rowe says. “Playing the game doesn’t turn a child into Mother Teresa, but it does get him thinking about humanitarian issues, and that hunger can be solved.”

The game’s Web site also offers tools for teachers, including downloadable lesson plans suitable for a variety of different grade levels. A survey conducted by WFP found that 10 percent of the game’s users play while at school.

What Critics Think

The WFP risked its international reputation with this project, and so the agency is relieved that reviews of the game have been largely positive. Jinny Gudmundsen, editor of *Computing With Kids* magazine, gave the game five out of five stars in her “CyberSpeak” column in *USA Today*. “The program effectively reaches ‘twins’ and teens with 3-D graphics and characters that resemble those in popular commercial titles, helping bring closer to home the problems of world hunger, which are most often thousands of miles away,” she wrote.

Josh Lee, a critic for the online magazine PopMatters, was one of the few reviewers to take a dimmer view, criticizing it

for “flimsy game play [that] makes you wonder why they bothered to design it as a video game at all, rather than an infomercial.”

Technical problems have been minimal except right after Food Force’s release, when there were so many hits that the game’s server crashed. WFP approached Yahoo!, which agreed to let WFP use its much more reliable server.

Since April, 2 million users in more than 40 different countries have downloaded the game. It is especially popular in the United States and Japan. To achieve its goal of 20 million downloads, WFP is translating the game into Japanese, French, Chinese, and Italian, and is promoting greater use in schools.

Learning Through Playing

Kids may be playing the game, but does it make them learn about world hunger? An informal assessment by WFP found that children retained 80 percent of the information embedded in the game. WFP will soon undertake a study to evaluate the game’s impact on a sample of 3,000 users. In the meantime, other studies are more generally finding that “well-designed, action-adventure video games can significantly improve learning, skill development, and behavior change,” says Debra Lieberman, a researcher at the Institute for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Research at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

There are already signs that players are taking to heart the Web site’s suggestions about how to help. “I get \$3 checks from children who save up their allowances, or money they earned from raking leaves,” Carrington says. “Kids want to feel like they are helping and doing something.”

Who would have expected the world’s largest bureaucracy to be in the vanguard of video game development? “We went blindly into this genre,” admits Carrington. “It’s not like we had experience with video games. We just took a chance.” □

—Sheryl Nance-Nash is a freelance writer in Long Beach, N.Y., who writes about personal finance and business. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Money*, *Black Enterprise*, and *Essence*.

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