

“Never Again”... Will I Play this Game

Haley Heinemann

Within the conversation on the genocide in Darfur, a new voice has emerged: Darfurisdying.com. This website features a viral video game where the player is supposed to obtain an insight into the lives of Darfurians amongst the struggle. I discuss in my paper why this game is limited by its choice of genre and how it potentially fails to entice support by its players.

Since gaining its independence from Belgium in 1956, Sudan, Africa's largest country, has been torn apart by a civil war between the Muslim north and the Christian south. Ideological disparity, struggle for land, struggle for money, and struggle for resources have fostered the tense war for decades. Within the context of this civil war, a wave of government-funded civilian destruction began in the country's largest district-Darfur. In close coordination with a rebel gang known as the Janjaweed, the Sudanese government has instigated the manipulation of humanitarian access, the total destruction of hundreds of villages, the mass raping of women, and the mass murder of many in an effort to “ethnically cleanse.” As recently as January 2011, non-government organizations have estimated that 400,000 Darfurian civilians have been killed, 250,000 have been displaced from Sudan into surrounding countries, such as Chad, and 2.8 million people have been displaced within Sudan (“11 Facts about Darfur”). Today, the United States and the global community are witnesses to this destruction. In September of 2004, United States Secretary of State Collin Powell declared the conflicts in Sudan to be defined by the term “genocide.” Yet despite this continued public recognition, little to no direct efforts are being made to bring an end to the killing.

In response to the ongoing genocide and the global reluctance to intervene, hundreds of stakeholders have entered the conversation on Darfur. Many of which have spoken in order to motivate citizens of the global community to change Sudan's circumstances. The different ways in which these stakeholders have chosen to enter this conversation notably affect the response the audience will give. One important wave of stakeholders has created the Games for Change movement where viral video games are used to enter the discussion and incite action by their players. The website Darfurisdying.com is the home of one such viral video game. Designed by Susanna Ruiz for an MTV-University contest, the game was generated to increase awareness of the Darfur genocide and inspire the younger generations of Americans to help the Darfurians.

The game consists of a simplistic design: using only the arrow keys and space bar. Players are required to forage for water and maintain their refugee camp by distributing the water gathered

for crops and bricks. Players are given eight avatars to choose from- six of which are children. While foraging for water the virtual player dodges and hides from the Janjaweed militia behind scarce, but fortunately placed, rocks and bushes.

While the website is an honorable attempt to increase awareness in America's younger citizens, it is unlikely to create any long lasting effect on the users. By existing mainly as a viral video game, the site is confined by the limitations of its genre. Due to the incredibly limited time available to interact with the audience, the content lacks depth, relying almost solely on a simplistic and trivialized game. An immediate appeal to shock factor and guilt is valued more than a deeper understanding or true empathy. And an unrespectable ploy to gain ethos cheapens the reliability of the game designers. The site ultimately fails to remove itself from the gaming context where mindless play and sheer amusement are general expectations. Thus, users are left with no more motivation or commitment to help the Sudanese than before playing.

Many will undoubtedly argue that this website is an upright endeavor- and it is. It is important to mention that Susanna Ruiz has made an honorable attempt in this author's opinion. It seems clear that her intentions are pure and her efforts grand. She attempts to reach a specific audience that is not often catered to and she tries to use her knowledge for good. Her ultimate choice of genre, however, results in her own insufficiency and lack of impact. It is clear that the false generalizations she makes about the values held by the youth of America directly results in a website poorly tailored for its audience.

The non-specific content of Susanna Ruiz's website fails to educate or inspire players. Instead, a simple "snap-shot" of the issue is distributed. In order for an American youth to make a positive impact on the suffering of the Sudanese, he or she must be well informed of all the aspects of the issue on top of acquiring the ambition to help at all. On the website, important material is hidden. Small links on the sides of vast pictures require the player to search for fact-based material or general discussion of the issue. Pop-ups occur during the game. These are too easily confused as advertisements and are even easier to become a nuisance which one closes out of without a moment's hesitation. If the player does happen to stumble upon a link or pop-up, he or she will find that cheap and flashy evidence provides little to no well-rounded dialogue on the topic, as well as a firmly pronounced bias. Ultimately, writing to your congressman about an issue you do not understand will make your point weak and more easily ignored. Unknowingly donating your money to one of the humanitarian organizations that fail to deliver their aid to Sudanese citizens makes your donation utterly useless. And even more, if one is not inspired to help, no attempt will be made at all.

Clearly, the game itself is the main portion of the website, bordered by a few advertisements and links in the background. This is unfortunate, however, as the game is an overly simplistic and false portrayal of life within a genocide. It can be argued that the game actually desensitizes its players to the terror of Darfurians. The avatars that a player chooses from are idealized. Instead of asserting the most lifelike design possible, the game settles for cartoonish figures. The lack of "realness" resembles a "Dora the Explorer" type character rather than a living, feeling human being. The figures are also depicted to be in perfectly healthy condition. No scrapes, bruises, malnutrition, or disabilities are evident despite the documentation that many refugees will not be this vigorous or strong (some sort of substantiation should be probably be here). A 15 year old

self-identified “gamer”, John Keenan, points out that he’s not sure “you can get a real experience of being a Darfurian refugee by playing a game on the computer,” and it is evident that these experiences are in fact distorted in the game (Vargas). The game is also based on the false assumption that, while refugees are foraging for water, there will always be a place to hide. As is real life, however, there will not be a giant rock or leafy bush placed every few feet to hide behind. And even if a place is found to conceal oneself, it does not guarantee safety.

Furthermore, the sheer lack of consequence minimizes the horror. As a player on a computer, the game is designed to let us simply pick a new person to represent us. We do not see the person being captured by the militia or being raped and probably killed. Nor does the game portray the militia attacking the camps. Instead, the militia is barely depicted at all- an image that could potentially have a severe impact on the player.

In addition, the overly emphasized appeals to pathos fail to engage an impression that lasts longer than a few minutes. Based on the construction of the website discussed earlier, the site relies almost solely on a strong reaction by the users- a lot of times through emotional appeal. For instance, there are more women and children featured in images and pictures than men on the site. This taps into our emotional bias that crimes committed against women and children are even more disturbing than those committed against men. Furthermore, the overall layout of the site has sad and disturbing pictures take up as much of the page as possible, while the descriptions are twelve-point font and fall to the sides as the dreaded “small print.” This uneven distribution highlights a more emotional response because of how much more effective images can often be to create an instant pathological response. James G. Brown also considers the extreme appeal of emotion by describing students’ reactions and opinions to the game as a summer assignment for freshmen entering college. Brown, disturbed by a large number of students cheering during the game demonstration, concludes that the simulation is “inappropriate.” And in terms of getting students involved, the game simply unsuitably engaged the students for merely a few minutes: only until they were out of orientation and were released to go on with the rest of their lives (Brown 23). An almost more disturbing aspect of the game is the misplaced emotion that it creates. The website claims that giving the players a choice of what Darfurian will represent their camp causes the “player to identify emotionally with an individual” (Ruiz). As the Social Media Soapbox blog points out, however, these avatars are nothing “more than cartoon characters” to players. They barely resemble a human being and lack any kind of “fictional profile” to humanize them- failing to even elicit the superficial emotional response the game relies on (Rothman). As blogger from the Save Darfur Accountability Project blog points out, the game may be associating this desperate situation with fun. He wonders if our children are learning “to understand the crisis in the absence of any historical context” or if “they are learning that living in IDP [Internationally Displaced Persons] camps is fun” (Rothman). It is absurd to consider whether we are teaching them to act out of guilt rather than out of compassion.

Moreover, the failed attempt to provide ethos incidentally serves to demerit the source. The game cites how famous people like Kanye West and Joey Cheek all played the game Darfur is Dying (Ruiz). In doing so, Susanna Ruiz is implying that the game’s assertions have merit because the rich and famous play this game. By making this blatant implication, the site actually loses credit. Students are taught in school to fact check and consider a source’s ethos. While it seems Ruiz believes the young adults of America are hopelessly star-struck, I believe the

audience deserves more credit. I believe it is still readily apparent to the members of my generation that a famous singer like Kanye and the New York Times author Nicholas Kristof maintain very different levels of credit concerning Sudan.

The website Darfurisdying.com ultimately fails to accomplish its stated goal: to bring “together student technology and activism to help stop the genocide in Darfur” (Ruiz). The constraints of the genre are why the game fails to do so. The website was indeed created for the right reasons, but it is not that simple. As a website that features the game more than the written explanation, a sense of depth and importance is eliminated. The game itself fails to grasp a character design that fairly depicts a real human being in distress or that correctly expresses the difficult and life-threatening tasks that are required by the victims on a daily basis.

Simply stated: this game is a *game*. Just as there are no Holocaust-inspired games where individual prisoners may be chosen, nor should there be a game inspired by Sudan. As offended as I am by the implication that it is *this* type of demeaning literature that will best reach my generation, I am more offended for those being killed, raped, and destroyed in Sudan. These people do not get to “Play Again” or leave the site, but instead continue to struggle to survive in a world where killers go free and the bystanders respond with a video game.

Works Cited

- “11 Facts about Darfur.” *Do Something.org*. Web. 21 Feb. 2011.
- Brown, James G. “Teaching About Genocide in a New Millennium.” *Social Education* 71.1 (2007): 21-23. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 26 Jan. 2010.
- Rothman, Steve. “Darfur is Dying - Can a Video Game Help Resolve a Humanitarian Crisis?” *Social Media Soapbox*. 14 Jun. 2009. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.
- Ruiz, Susan, et al. *Darfur is Dying*. mtvU. 2009. Web. 29 January 2011.
- Vargas, Jose Antonio. “In ‘Darfur Is Dying,’ The Game That’s Anything But.” *Washington Post*, 1 May 2006. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.