

A Parallel World for the World Bank: A Case Study of *Urgent: Evoke*, An Educational Alternate Reality Game

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Article abstract

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A Parallel World for the World Bank: A Case Study of *Urgent: Evoke*, An Educational Alternate Reality Game

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Abstract

In 2010, the World Bank launched *Urgent: Evoke*, an alternate reality game. Conceived in response to the demands of African universities, the game was designed to promote the World Bank Institute's vision of positive global change through social innovation, and made substantial use of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, personal profiles, and social networks. This article offers a case study of *Urgent: Evoke*, divided into four sections: first, the potential to use video games as citizenship education tools is discussed; second, the unique game genre (alternate reality games) into which *Evoke* falls is explained and some possible uses of this genre in higher education are examined; third, the functioning of the *Evoke* game world is explained; and fourth, the results of the *Evoke* educational project are assessed. The case study concludes with some commentary on *Evoke*'s ideological message, which those less sympathetic to capitalism may view as problematic.

Keywords:

alternate reality games; Web 2.0; higher education; educational project; evaluation

Résumé

En 2010, la Banque mondiale a lancé *Urgent Evoke*, un jeu en réalité alternée. Créé en réponse aux demandes d'universités africaines, le jeu a été conçu pour promouvoir la vision de l'Institut de la Banque mondiale d'un changement mondial positif par l'innovation sociale. Il fait un usage important des outils du Web 2.0 tels que les blogues, les profils personnels et les réseaux sociaux. Cet article est une étude de cas d'*Urgent Evoke* en quatre parties : premièrement, le potentiel d'utilisation des jeux vidéo comme outils d'éducation à la citoyenneté est évoqué; deuxièmement, le type unique de jeux (jeux en réalité alternée) dans lequel se classe *Evoke* est expliqué et les utilisations possibles de ces jeux dans l'enseignement supérieur sont examinées;



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troisièmement, le fonctionnement de l'univers du jeu *Evoke* est expliqué; et quatrièmement, les résultats du projet pédagogique *Evoke* sont évalués. L'étude de cas se termine par des commentaires sur le message idéologique d'*Evoke* qui peut apparaître problématique à ceux qui sont moins favorables au capitalisme.

Mots clés

jeux de réalité virtuelle; Web 2.0; études supérieures; projet pédagogique; évaluation

Introduction

In May 2010, the World Bank Institute, the capacity-building arm of the World Bank, spent \$500,000 to launch an online alternate reality game, *Urgent: Evoke* (Sutter, 2010). Originally created in response to the demands of African universities, the game, which unfolded in “episodes” over the course of ten weeks, was designed to promote the World Bank’s vision of positive global change through social innovation among a global audience (Evoke, 2010a). *Evoke* made substantial use of Web 2.0 tools—blogs, personal profiles, social networks, and leaderboards were all major components—and the game also drew on social media tools. Crafted by leading game designer Jane McGonigal, *Evoke* was generally warmly received by bloggers and critics, winning a Direct Impact award at the Games for Change conference in 2011 (Gamesforchange.org).

This case study of *Evoke* unfolds in four sections: first, I discuss the potential of games as citizenship education tools; second, I explain the unique game genre (alternate reality games) into which *Evoke* falls and discuss some possible uses of this genre in higher education; third, I describe how the *Evoke* game world functioned while it was up and running; and fourth, I assess the results of this educational project. I conclude with some remarks on the ideological message conveyed by *Evoke*, which those less inclined to be sympathetic to capitalism may find problematic.

Games as Citizenship Education Tools

As a prelude to a discussion of alternate reality games, it is worth briefly reviewing the scholarly context in which educational games like *Evoke* are situated. On first inspection, the significance of a game like *Evoke* for higher education may not be evident: currently, games occupy only a marginal place in university classrooms. Yet there is reason to believe that games may play an increasingly significant educational role, and one of the strongest arguments for this hypothesis is that games are now universally present in the lives of young people: a recent Pew Foundation survey demonstrated that 97% of American teenagers (both male and female) had played some type of game in the past month (Lenhart et al., 2008). When this popularity is taken together with the growing theoretical literature on the power of games as educational tools (Bogost, 2007, 2011; Gee, 2003; Flanagan, 2006), the possibility of leveraging the power of gaming in higher education merits careful investigation.

One especially promising niche within educational gaming is games that potentially contribute to the development of skills, knowledge, and values linked to citizenship. Also known as “civic games” (Raphael, Bachen, Lynn, Baldwin-Philippi, & McKee, 2010), they have elicited a surge of interest following the results of a 2009 MacArthur Foundation Report, *The Civic Potential of Video Games*, which demonstrated a correlation between positive citizenship-linked outcomes such as volunteerism and political engagement and the playing of certain types of games high in citizenship-related content (Kahne, Middaugh, & Evans, 2009). Some examples of the civic games cited in the MacArthur report are the *SimCity* and *Civilization* series, both of which have seen substantial use in higher education (Gaber, 2007; Lobo, 2007). Although (as will become apparent below) *Evoke* uses a radically different game mechanic from either of these two well-known game series, it also fits into the civic game category: it aims to help students develop the

skills required to enact a particular ideal of global citizenship.

Since civic games are a fairly new area of inquiry, it is not surprising that the academic literature is scattered and diffuse. However, it is possible to divide the existing empirical literature into three broad categories: 1) Substantial work, some in the area of higher education, has been done on commercial games that aim specifically to simulate political or civic processes. This game category includes *SimCity* and *Civilization* as well as more complex and less well-known simulations such as *Europa Universalis II* (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2007). Simple, flash-based political simulations have received attention as well (Neys & Jansz, 2010). 2) An emerging body of research addresses the civic potential of massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs), which differ markedly from the first category in that they are not primarily designed to simulate civic processes. Researchers have suggested that these MMORPG environments, which involve simultaneous play with thousands of other gamers in a persistent world, may offer a useful “third place” (i.e., beyond home and school) for civic development (Curry, 2010; Steinkuehler, 2005), and may help develop collaboration and leadership skills (Jang & Ryu, 2011; Whitton & Hollins, 2008). 3) Several efforts have been made to build and study customized non-commercial educational gaming environments (Barab et al., 2007; Gaydos & Squire, 2012). One of the most well-known of these is *Quest: Atlantis*, which aims to develop ecological stewardship skills, but a number of other games have been produced by science educators in an attempt to help students better understand scientific processes and begin to see themselves as capable social actors.

For its part, *Evoke* fits best into the last of these three categories, given that it is a customized, non-commercial game environment designed to achieve citizenship-relevant outcomes. However, as will become clear below, *Evoke* looks drastically diffe-

rent from anything else in this category, due to the fact that it is an alternate reality game.

What are Alternate Reality Games?

In order to properly situate *Evoke*, it is necessary to say something about alternate reality games (ARGs), the emerging genre to which this game belongs. Unlike traditional video games, which usually provide a self-standing virtual environment, alternate reality games function by overlaying the “real world” with a fictional narrative (e.g., “People from the future have travelled back in time to hide a treasure in our time.”) that enrolls the user in a series of tasks and puzzles (e.g., “Decoding this Web page will reveal GPS coordinates.”) (‘Alternate reality game’, 2012; Bonsignore, Hansen, Kraus, & Ruppel, 2011; Kim, Lee, Thomas, & Dombrowsky, 2009). In a traditional computer game, these game elements unfold exclusively within the game world itself: the game’s custom-made virtual environment presents users with a challenge that they then solve within that environment. In an ARG, however, the game elements take place in the alternate universe that is built by fusing “real life” with the game’s narrative. Thus, if a player uncovers the hidden GPS coordinates on a Web page, they might go to the “real-life” location to obtain further clues.

The best way to understand the significance of this preliminary definition is to look at some actual examples of ARGs. There is a consensus that the first successful large-scale ARG was *The Beast*, a 2001 effort planned as a viral marketing campaign for the Steven Spielberg movie *Artificial Intelligence* (Askwith, 2006). The game offered two “rabbit holes,” which are entry points designed to capture users’ interest. First, the film poster contained an unexplained credit to Jeanine Salla, a “sentient machine therapist” (Szulborski, 2005). Second, the film trailer contained a hidden phone number that, when called, yielded the following phone message:

Welcome, my child. Once upon a time there was a forest, that teemed with life, love, sex, and violence [...] It can be a frightening forest, and some of its paths are dark and difficult. I was lost there once—a long time ago. Now I try to help others who have gone astray. If you ever feel lost, my child, write me at thevisionary.net [...]. (Quoted in Szulborski, 2005)

Accessing this website at thevisionary.net revealed that a person named Evan Chan had been murdered and that “Jeanine” was the key. Thus, both rabbit holes—the poster and the trailer with its linked website—led users to Google “Jeanine Salla,” which in turn led them to a fictitious personal website for Salla, which had been set up by the game masters. This website was seeded with yet more clues, which sent users off and running through a series of dozens of websites, photographs, telephone calls, email messages, and video clips set up by the game masters (‘The Beast’, 2012). *The Beast’s* puzzles were extremely difficult, and a large 7,000-member online community, The Cloudmakers, sprung up in order to share information and cooperate in solving the puzzles (McGonigal, 2003).

A more recent example of a successful ARG is *Perplex City*, a 2005 game that had as its premise the unearthing of a valuable cube that had been buried on Earth by travelers from a parallel world. In order to find the buried cube and win a \$100,000 prize, players had to solve an enormous number of puzzles that gradually unlocked the game story (Moseley, 2008). A novel element of *Perplex City’s* design was that although some of these puzzles were available on the Web in the manner of *The Beast*, other game elements were available only on collectible cards that could be purchased in game stores. *Perplex City* also required players to cooperate to solve some of its puzzles. In one particularly interesting example, “Billion to One,” the card asked players to find the full identity of an unidentified Japanese tourist named Satoshi. All that was provided was a photograph, the name “Satoshi,” and the instructions “Find me” (<http://billiontoone.org>).

In another challenge, Violet Kiteway, a character in the future world of *Perplex City*, revealed that she needed to become a “published author” to obtain access to a fictional library that would reveal important clues (<http://perplexcitywiki.com>). As a result, a group of players collaborated to create an actual collection of short stories, *Tales from Earth*, in which Violet Kiteway “published” a story. In the end, *Perplex City* enrolled over 50,000 players in 92 countries, who followed the saga of the hidden cube for more than two years. In 2007, the cube was finally dug up in Northamptonshire by a 38-year-old player who claimed the \$100,000 reward (BBC News, 2007).

Entertainment is not the only niche that ARGs occupy; there is also substantial interest in using ARGs as educational tools, especially in higher education (Connolly, Stansfield, & Hainey, 2011; Whitton & Hollins, 2008). Alex Moseley (2008), an educational designer at the University of Leicester who was an enthusiastic participant in *Perplex City*, argues that ARGs offer the possibility to promote three outcomes that are highly relevant in higher education: student engagement, the development of problem-solving skills, and the building of communities of practice. Drawing on his own experiences as well as data collected from a survey of *Perplex City* players, he suggests that these outcomes could also be facilitated in an ARG that was customized for a higher education environment.

Some preliminary investigations have already been conducted along these lines. For example, Whitton, Jones, Wilson and Whitton (2012) detail an ambitious project called ARGOSI (Alternate Reality Games for Orientation, Socialisation, and Induction). In the ARGOSI project, the game designers used posters and stickers scattered around the campus as well as emails to lure students into the world of Viola Procter, a fictitious student “who had discovered a mysterious old letter and map fragment” and needed help to decode a variety of clues. The game, which began in 2008, was a joint initiative by Manchester Metropolitan University and the

University of Bolton, and was intended to help students learn to get around Manchester and work together. Unfortunately, very few students decided to go down the game’s “rabbit hole”; Whitton et al. (2012) report that only five students became highly engaged in the game during its one-year run. Other endeavors have also been discouraging; Piatt (2009) reports similarly dismal results for an ARG-based orientation game on the ELGG platform. Still, the fact remains that the educational use of ARG technology is in its infancy, and it would be hasty to write it off based on these initial, disheartening results. As I explain in the following sections, *Evoke* was a far more sustained and well-financed effort than the projects described by Whitton et al. (2012) and Piatt (2009), and it elicited substantially higher player engagement.

What was *Evoke*?

It is probably easiest to present *Evoke*’s basic structure by beginning with the initial “rabbit hole” that the game offered to the players. The game opened with the following instructions, read out slowly by a stentorian African-accented voice:

This is not a simulation. You are about to tackle real problems--food security, energy, water security, disaster relief, poverty, pandemic, education, human rights. Welcome to the Evoke Network. Welcome to your crash course in changing the world.

What’s an “evoke”?...An evoke is an urgent call to innovation...Every Wednesday at midnight, the network will send out a new evoke. How to respond to an urgent evoke:

1. Read the story
2. Investigate the story
3. Accept your mission (Evoke, 2010b)

The intent of these general instructions, which were read against a background of staticky sound effects, was clearly to make the players feel as though they were the recipients of a secret broadcast. They

were, according to the game, now members of the shadowy but noble *Evoke* team, and they had to work in order to generate “ideas that have never been tried before” and “innovative solutions.” They were informed that if they completed their mission each week, they would be certified as a “World Bank Institute Certified Social Innovator—Class of 2010.” Players were also presented with a chance to win a trip to a Social Innovation conference in Washington, D.C. (Evoke, 2012b).

As the general instructions quoted above note, the first step each week for the player was to “**read the story.**” [See Figure 1 for an outline of how *Evoke* assigned tasks to players each week]. The game introduced its storyline, as well as the basic ideas behind each educational “mission,” through a weekly seven-page comic strip that tells a story about “The Network,” a fictional secretive group of citizens that swoops in to help solve global problems [See Figure 2 for an example of panels from the comic].

In the first episode of the *Evoke* comic, entitled “Social Innovation,” the year is 2020 and the Governor of Tokyo is panicking because the city is “down to their final month of rice reserves” (Evoke, 2010c). He calls upon the assistance of The Network, who, apparently, “solved the Maize famine of 2017” in Nigeria (Evoke, 2010c). Alchemy, the leader of The Network, makes a deal with the Governor and issues a call (an “evoke”) for the team to come to Tokyo and deal with the rice famine. The Network members are enthusiastic—for them, the rice famine constitutes an opportunity to make money and help the world at the same time. As he boards a helicopter, one Network member comments, “I think we’d better move fast to corner the market in Tokyo. Maybe [others aren’t interested in it yet], but once we show the world the enterprise potential, everyone will be fighting for a slice” (Evoke, 2010c).

Once The Network arrives in Tokyo, they inform the Governor of the terms of the bargain: “Our specialists will handle your food shortage, but everything is off the books. You’ll quietly facilitate local resources and access to public land, we’ll provide

the imagination” (Evoke, 2010c). In exchange, the Network will provide Tokyo with the capacity to have “fresh fruits and vegetables every day of the year.” “We’ll keep 50% of the profits,” Network leader Alchemy informs the Governor, “and you can take all of the credit” (Evoke, 2010c).

Once the game players had “**read the story**” in this initial episode of the comic, they were assigned to “**investigate the story.**” In this particular part of the assignment, the game informed them that there were “thirteen secrets to Episode One” (Evoke, 2010d). As it turned out, in the context of the game, these “secrets” were questions that drew on things that are mentioned in the first episode. One question was “What is a Harajuku girl?” while another (perhaps somewhat more topical but rather less interesting) was “What is food security?” (Evoke, 2010d).

Once the “**investigate the story**” aspect of the assignment was complete and the players presumably understood more about the subject matter of the episode, they were assigned to “**accept [their] mission.**” In the case of the first episode, the game provided players with the following mission instructions:

Congratulations. You’re off to a good start...Now you must go further. You’re ready for your first mission. You’re ready to become a social innovator.

Social innovators invent creative solutions to the world’s biggest problems.

We don’t wait for someone else to change the world. We do it ourselves.

Your mission this week:
Master the mindset of a social innovator. (Evoke, 2010e)

As was the case for all of *Evoke*’s ten weekly episodes, the mission section of the assignment was broken down into three facets: Learn, Act, and Imagine. If the player completed one of the three facets, they received credit for the week; if they completed all three facets, they received “legendary credit” (Evoke, 2010b).

In the case of the social innovation episode, the Learn component of the mission consisted of reading a blog post: “Innovation in Africa Tips.” The “33 secrets” contained in this blog post include a number of insights such as “Think like a child – children have no limit to their thinking,” and “Keep learning from your customers” (Design in Africa, 2008). In order to earn credit, the players were assigned to “pick your favorite secret and share it in a blog post” (Evoke, 2010f).

The Act phase of the social innovation mission asked players to “choose a hero to shadow”—the hero, in this case, being a real-life social innovator of some sort (Evoke, 2010g). Players were encouraged to go to a variety of websites that listed brief biographies of social innovators. They were then asked to friend the innovator on Facebook, follow them on Twitter, and subscribe to the innovator’s blog. To receive credit for this shadowing activity, the players were required to document it in a blog post.

The third phase of the mission—Imagine—offered the following instructions: “Imagine your best-case scenario future. Where will you be living in 2020? What will you do with your days? How are you changing the world on a daily basis?” (Evoke, 2010h). Players were assigned to write a blog post about “where you are and what you are doing when Alchemy calls YOU to help with the Tokyo food crisis” (Evoke, 2010h).

Throughout its ten-week cycle, Evoke repeated the same structure—read the story, investigate the story, complete the mission (learn, act, and imagine). The topics of each story and mission varied—the other weekly episodes of the game were dedicated, respectively, to food security, sustainable power, water shortages, the future of money, empowering women, urban resilience, indigenous knowledge, crisis networking, and the future of *Evoke* (Evoke, 2010c).

Beyond its basic structure, the game also integrated a number of intriguing social elements. All *Evoke* players had to create personal profiles, which

showed their picture and listed their current number of *Evoke* points. Players were also allowed to award points to each other—if a player liked the blog post of another player, they could +1 it, and the other player would then receive an extra point. These points were at least somewhat relevant, since *Evoke* had a leaderboard that continually updated the players on their respective rankings.

It should be noted, however, that the number of points did not determine the winner of *Evoke*. In order to win, players were needed to first fulfill the prerequisite of completing all the missions. Beyond this, though, they also needed to create an “Evokation,” a social innovation project that, if selected, would receive either a scholarship to attend the *Evoke* summit in Washington, D.C., a mentorship with an experienced social innovator, or seed funding of \$1000 (Evoke, 2010j).

Assessing the Results of *Evoke*

A reasonable place to begin assessing *Evoke* is to see how well the game did in meeting its own considerable objectives.

Given that this was a well-funded and highly organized project, it is not surprising that the *Evoke* team saw their task at least partly in terms of quantitative targets. In a “Behind the Scenes” post on the *Evoke* blog, the team posted the following data:

Table I

Evoke Participation Targets and Results

User category	Target Number	Actual Number
Visitors	87,500	177,673
Registered	6,875	19,324
Active	700	4,693
Certified	70	223
Evokation completion	7	74

(Evoke, 2010l)

There are several striking elements within these results. First, given that the World Bank spent half a million dollars on this project, these initial targets are surprisingly modest in certain respects. Although registered player targets are high, the visitor, active player, and certified player totals are low. Despite offering a high-production-value game and valuable prizes, the team anticipated that they would certify only 70 people and receive 7 Evokation proposals. This appears to be a low estimated yield; given the game’s overall budget, the cost per Evokation proposal works out to \$71,000!

Second, although the number of visitors and registered players is impressive, the number of certified players and Evokation-completing players is less so. Considering that half a million dollars was spent to create a video game that was completed by only 223 players, it could be argued that this was not an especially successful endeavor. Furthermore, as noted above, only a modest effort (one small learn/act/imagine task for each of ten weeks) was required to achieve completion. Thus, one could be a “certified” player and be only modestly invested in the game, and the low numbers of certification should be viewed with greater scrutiny in light of this fact. Moreover, the number of completed Evokations is unimpressive, especially given the valuable prizes on offer.

That said, the *Evoke* team nevertheless managed to develop a fairly vigorous community on the site. Although it is unclear what the team means when they write that 4693 users were “Active,” the fact remains that throughout the game’s ten-week run, the *Evoke* site was often vibrant, with an engaged community of users regularly going on quests, blogging, and +1ing each others’ posts. The designers highlighted this fact for the players by integrating an activity feed. As game designer Jane McGonagall remarks, “It added a level of transparency to how many people were actively playing; throughout the entire 10 weeks, we averaged a 25-minute cycle in which the activity feed entirely replenished itself” (Evoke, 2010l).

Turning from *Evoke*’s global quantitative results, it is also instructive to look at some of the winning entries in the Evokation contest, given that these were, in a sense, the crowning achievements of the most dedicated *Evoke* players. Many of these attempts at social innovation, albeit well meaning, seem neither realistic nor well thought out. Take, for example, Re-Buffalo, an initiative to renew Buffalo, NY:

Buffalo needs a new paradigm for solving our problems and steering a course for the future. ReBuffalo.org will give anyone with Internet access the ability to submit content and learn about innovative ideas and concepts from the worlds of academia, politics, and community activism, and it will provide an “ideagora” (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideagoras>) that is available to anyone and everyone who has an interest in the future of Buffalo. (Wallace, 2010)

This, it must be said, was an entry that was awarded *Evoke*’s top prize. Today, all that remains of Buffalo’s “new paradigm” is a disused Facebook page and Twitter feed. Some of the winning projects were more realistic (e.g., a proposal to fund an experimental orchard in India designed to replace monocropping), but the majority appeared to be poorly specified and unlikely to succeed.

However, it may be unjust to judge *Evoke* by the projects that were proposed. After all, the game was an educational project, and the desired outcome was not the production of polished final projects, but rather the promulgation of a particular message. The game’s creators explain:

EVOKE was [...] conceived as a crash-course in changing the world. It is a chance to showcase the kind of resourceful innovation and creative problem-solving that is happening today in sub-Saharan Africa and other developing regions, and to collectively imagine how the lessons from those scenarios can transfer, scale, and ultimately benefit the entire planet. (Evoke, 2010a)

For *Evoke*’s dedicated players, this message seemed to resonate. The Evokation projects and the substantial number of active users on the site demonstrated that *Evoke* did, in fact, get a substantial number of people excited about social innovation. The game empowered at least some players to feel that they could begin taking action that would improve the situation of both themselves and those around them, and they consequently began to apply the alternate reality created by *Evoke* to their own local realities.

Yet the application of the alternate reality was not always unproblematic. Consider the following example from the “Thoughts and Ideas” section of *Evoke*. User Emile Jansen writes:

Almost every day I see at least 10 homeless people on the street and the thought that comes to my mind is that they are humans like you and me and are spending day after day doing nothing. What if we could find a way of using this unused manpower [...] unfortunately I don’t have any ideas yet. (Evoke, 2010m)

This question received the following response from Gary Wood, for whom the proverbial invisible knapsack of white privilege appears rather full:

I've seen some resourceful homeless people who would do menial tasks like shine shoes for money. So the accountability issue is resolved and they are getting money. Most places with homeless people have a trashy feel to it. But to have my shoes shined by a homeless person actually gave the place a more classy feel to it. [...] We aren't aware of what skills a homeless person may possess, but I'm positive all of them could do some cleaning and make their areas appear classier and nicer. (Evoke, 2010m)

The thread continues on a more encouraging note with a response from Katherine Morrison:

Here's my idea, shelters+rooftop/community gardens. What if every homeless shelter had a rooftop garden or community garden? Those homeless needing help could be given workshops by volunteers, taught the necessary skills to cultivate food, be given a plot in the community garden [...] (Evoke, 2010m)

It is in the discussion of issues like this where the potential educational strength (and, in a very significant sense, the weakness) of alternate reality games becomes clear. With conventional video games, users are immersed in a virtual realm. Granted, they bring with them all of their values and experiences, but while enclosed within the virtual space, they act only upon the simulated environment which it provides. This interaction generates new experiences that will undoubtedly affect subsequent experiences in conventional reality, but given that these experiences take place in the realm of the simulation, they will often be discounted when players return to the realm of the real. "After all," they will reason, "it was just a game."

In contrast, the potential effects of ARGs are not nearly so indirect. If successful, ARGs force users to interface directly with the real world through a lens created by the game masters. The experiences

that result are tinged by the overlay of the alternate reality, but nonetheless take place in the real world. When one conducts research or acts on the real environment at the behest of the ARG's directives, the resultant experiences will probably appear more significant and genuine. For example, when one acts on the world to promote social enterprise, the action cannot be discounted or disavowed as merely virtual, as would be possible in a game. Thus, if successful, a game like *Evoke* could potentially mobilize an indifferent user to engage in direct social action, and to understand and endorse the philosophy behind the action.¹ This potential is particularly significant for higher education, because compared to K-12 populations, university students are more likely to possess the intellectual and social capital required to effect social action.

Conclusion: Some Remarks on *Evoke's* Underlying Philosophy

This potential for direct educational impact raises the question of whether the social action being promoted is worthwhile. *Evoke* is dedicated to spreading the gospel of social innovation, which is, in essence, that one can create positive social change through entrepreneurial endeavors that both do good and make money. This is exemplified in the first episode summarized above, and even more sharply in the story in Episode 4, "Water Crisis," in which catastrophic floods have brought London to the verge of a cholera epidemic. Entrepreneur Quinn, part of The Network, is on the phone with his friend Mikkel, trying to convince him to donate some water purifiers:

¹ As revealed by Gary Wood's post that homeless people should "make their areas appear classier" (Jansen, 2010), the social tools being distributed are subject to the weaknesses of their wielders. One of the advantages of a traditional game environment (as opposed to an ARG) is that game designers have much more control over the actions that users are allowed to take.

If you look at the climate predictions, London's going to see more floods like this [...] In ten years, personal water purifiers are going to be an **absolute necessity** for every low-lying city on Earth. Mikkel, this is a **unique opportunity** to position yourself as the **brand** the world trusts for safe water [...] Yes, I'll hold. But in 30 seconds I'm on the phone with **Kamen** to give **him** the exclusive. (Evoke, 2010b)

In the world of *Evoke*, an impending cholera epidemic is not just a humanitarian crisis, but also a great moneymaking opportunity!

For anyone who is remotely skeptical about the ideology behind *Evoke*, this example should raise serious concerns. Is nimble capitalism really the solution to serious social ills, or is more radical change needed? Although social enterprise is more humane than naked exploitation, it may not be nearly as powerful a tool for social change as *Evoke* claims. As its episodes repeatedly demonstrate, *Evoke's* ideology is one in which government appears ineffective and powerless, while homegrown, market-based solutions are cheap, democratic, and transformative. Although market based solutions undoubtedly have some potential, one could argue that touting social enterprise as a panacea serves to distract from the more fundamental structural reforms that are needed to address social and environmental challenges—wealth redistribution, for example.

Nevertheless, this case study is not the place to resolve this difficult question. For those who believe in the World Bank's gospel of social innovation, in which one saves the world by simultaneously doing good and making money, *Evoke* is a flawed but potentially transformative evangelical tool. For those who are more agnostic about social innovation, a group to which I belong, *Evoke* will appear less alluring. And this highlights an important question: Once we get beyond the question of whether a game can be a useful educational tool—and in the case of *Evoke*, my answer is a cautious “Yes”—we

must deal with the question of whether the education being delivered is appropriate. This question, which is often neglected, is one that we should be asking much more frequently about educational games.

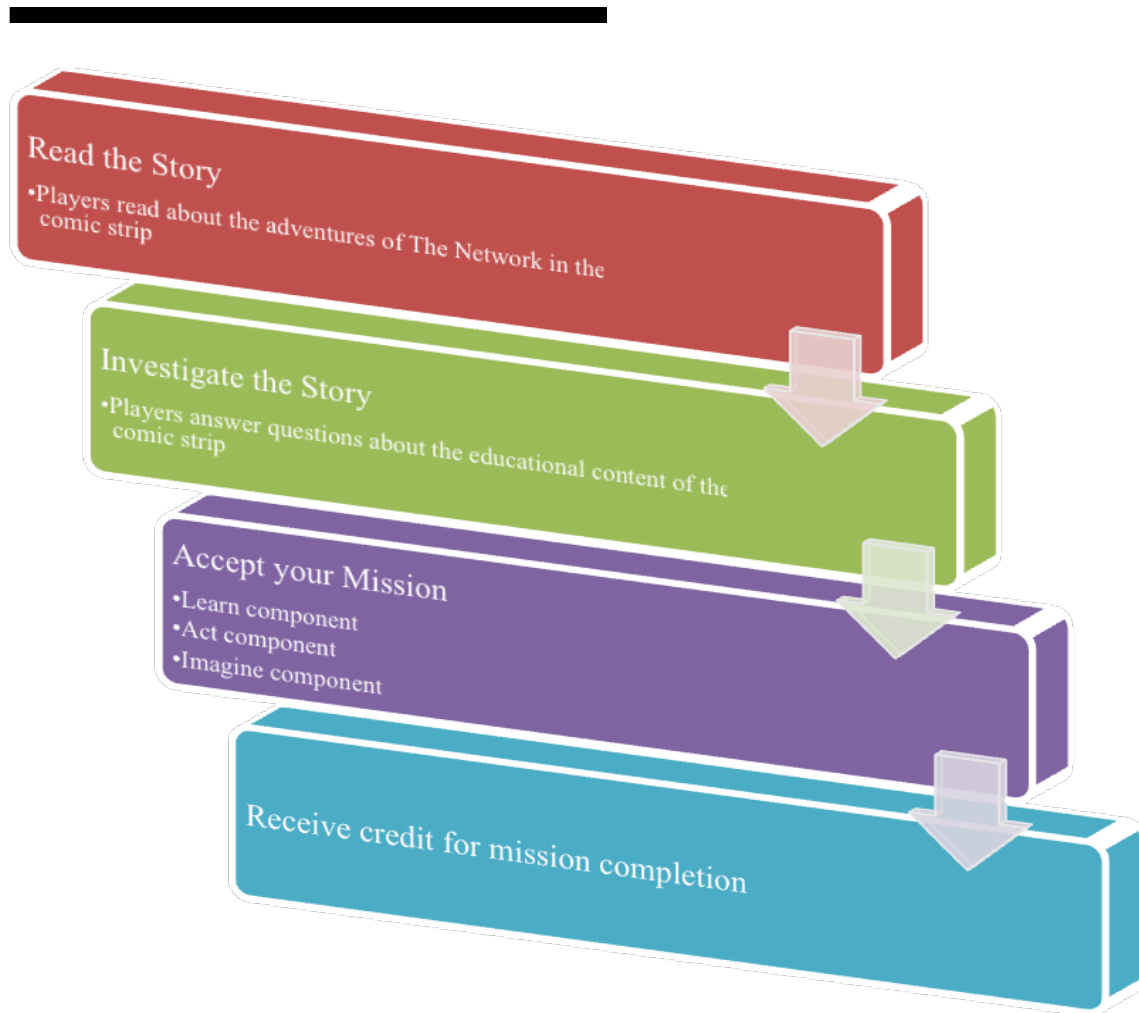


Figure 1: Evoke Assignment Structure

A CRASH COURSE IN CHANGING THE WORLD

Episode 001: The earth moves at different speeds depending on who you are. – Nigerian proverb



Figure 2: Evoke Comic Panel, Episode 1, Page 1

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