

**This interview was made by e-mail with Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, the CEO of Serious Games Interactive (<http://www.seriousgames.dk>).**

Serious Games Interactive, located in Copenhagen, is a company recently started by people convinced that the next generation of computer games will throw the shackles of mindless entertainment. Computer games are ripe with educational potential that until now have been mocked by tedious edutainment.

In combination the initiators behind Serious Games Interactive have a strong background within the game industry, educational thinking, and game research. The core idea is close collaboration between game developers, subject experts, and educational game researchers to produce game titles based on an existing strong game engine. The company Serious Games covers the developing and educational part whereas subject experts will be attached on an ad hoc basis matching each game project.

### **1. What is your name and title?**

Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen (CEO, PhD, Psychologist)

### **2. What kind of educational and training games do you design?**

We currently focus on getting out our first title Global Conflicts: Middle East that should be the first step towards a new generation of educational computer games that are closer to the quality of commercial entertainment games. This implies that game design, technology and scope is more ambitious than many educational titles we currently see. We also have other plans in the works but not finalized yet.

### **3. What is the target group of the games?**

Initially we aim at the educational sector (students 13+), but hope to be able to expand the game, so it will also appeal to the private market.

#### **4. What kind of educational elements do the games have?**

Basically the game provides the players with the chance to explore different perspectives, stories and experiences in the Middle East. This is structured in quests that the player have to solve and close by filling out a report. In addition to the quests students have access to an encyclopaedia, primary sources and links. We also provide a manual describing how the game is best integrated with other teaching forms.

#### **5. What is your approach to designing a game for educational purposes?**

Basically we are very aware of not losing the game in the process of making it educational. This is perhaps the largest challenge, which we find requires that you as a developer are very careful in respect to what topics, themes and curriculum you choose to cover. We think that most edutainment out there have been sidetracked by focusing on the core subjects for younger student (i.e. math and spelling)

#### **6. What kind of pedagogical theory are your products based on?**

The approach grows out of a framework that was developed in a recent PhD on educational use of computer games. This approach relies especially on experiential and constructivist learning where you focus on the game providing strong, rich and motivating concrete experiences that you can extend on with group discussions and plenum discussions in connection with the games. Games can take you places you wouldn't normally be able to enter, but you need to carefully consider how to transfer these experiences beyond the game context through observation and reflection.

In that respect we see computer games as working best in connection with other forms of teaching. Computer games are for us capable of providing rich, engaging, audiovisual experiences that you can explore in safety while feeling challenged.

## **7. What kind of reception have your games got?**

So far the reception of the prototype have been very good, but we have not yet really focused on getting press and coverage. The media coverage have mostly been in Denmark. We have also received good feedback at conferences, seminars and from talking with publishers.

## **8. What is your solution to the dilemma that the different type of learners and persons of different genders tend to like different kind of games?**

This is of course a problem but probably not much different than students preferring different genres within literature. That said I think one needs to take the problem seriously. In our game we operate with different missions and roles the player can choose that caters to different preferences.

## **9. According to some, players have a tendency to cheat or take the easiest/shortest path possible in the games. How should an educational game be designed to make it sure that the player doesn't skip important educational parts of the game?**

You can't give one universal answer to this as it depends on the specific game design, but it is a critical problem especially found in classic edutainment where you can deduct the answer without really thinking about it. To a large degree the problem arises because you fail to integrate the game and the educational part. If you design the game so that you are required to learn the educational content to progress then there is no problem. The problem is more a question of bad design than educational games. People will also cheat in commercial games if they can get away with it.

**10. What is your opinion on educational and training games in general? What kind of visions do you have on this?**

In general I think they suck. This is not necessarily, because developers and publishers do not know better but because we lack the hype, people and budgets to create the right projects. To often people fail to appreciate that in many respects educational games require more competences and skills than commercial games. It requires developing a game with all the constraints set up by educational context. Of course you will have fewer expectations on the graphical and technological front, but still the game design and implementation in actual educational settings are surprisingly challenging.

I hope that the area will continue to grow its momentum in the coming years and we will see more titles that document the potential for the area. I am sure Global Conflicts: Middle East will be one of these. I also hope that we will move beyond the curse of edutainment that seemed more a caricature of games than anything. In this process also catering to real games that are interested in games with an agenda beyond entertainment.

**11. Have you been designing commercial entertainment games? If you have, how does designing an educational or training game differ from that?**

I have already talked about this in questions 10. In general the differences lie in the game design, debriefing and implementation in educational context. You also have to be aware of the hardware limitations in schools.

**12. Have you used any open source software in designing and developing educational games?**

Yes and no. We use the excellent game engine UNITY by OverTheEdge that is fast, reliable and powerful. It also scales down to less powerful computers that many schools have without losing the option to have high quality for

more powerful machines. They do have open source software integrated in their game engine.