

# The Eighth Annual Game Design Think Tank

## Project Horseshoe 2013



## Group Report: Games & Government

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## Objective Statement

- To examine government structure in games, because there will a government in your online game whether you plan it or not, so you should plan for it.
- Discuss game designs that experiment with the concept and mechanics of government. This helps the masses and academics understand government on a systemic level.
- Discuss how game design can help us understand implications of policies and rules and thus can help us understand government and governance structures.

## Outline

During the Project Horseshoe weekend, we covered several big areas.

- Government Systems/Philosophies
- Government in Games
- How Games Apply to Real Government
- Games as Petri Dish for Understanding Governance

### I. Government Systems/Philosophies

There is a broad understanding in political science that every government of whatever philosophical stripe has a corporate structure that consists of similar things. Every government has an executive function and some technology by which power is expressed physically. It has some consultative organs - voting systems, representation, public speaking, press. It has some kind of adjudication systems, whether that be judges, appeals to agencies, or priests throwing sticks (or bones) on an altar. In this section, we will discuss a broader view of government, but as we go deeper in the document, we start to outline governance structures in games, which are useful for game designers.

#### 1.1 Commonly discussed forms of traditional government

Often we think of governments in shorthand, much like how we discuss game genres as being bundles of design patterns that cannot be separated. However, this method of discussion is naturally limited since in reality there is much overlap between the subsystems. Thinking in terms of categories rarely the same level of practical insight as thinking in terms of underlying processes.

- Dictatorial
- Capitalism
- Communism
- Socialism

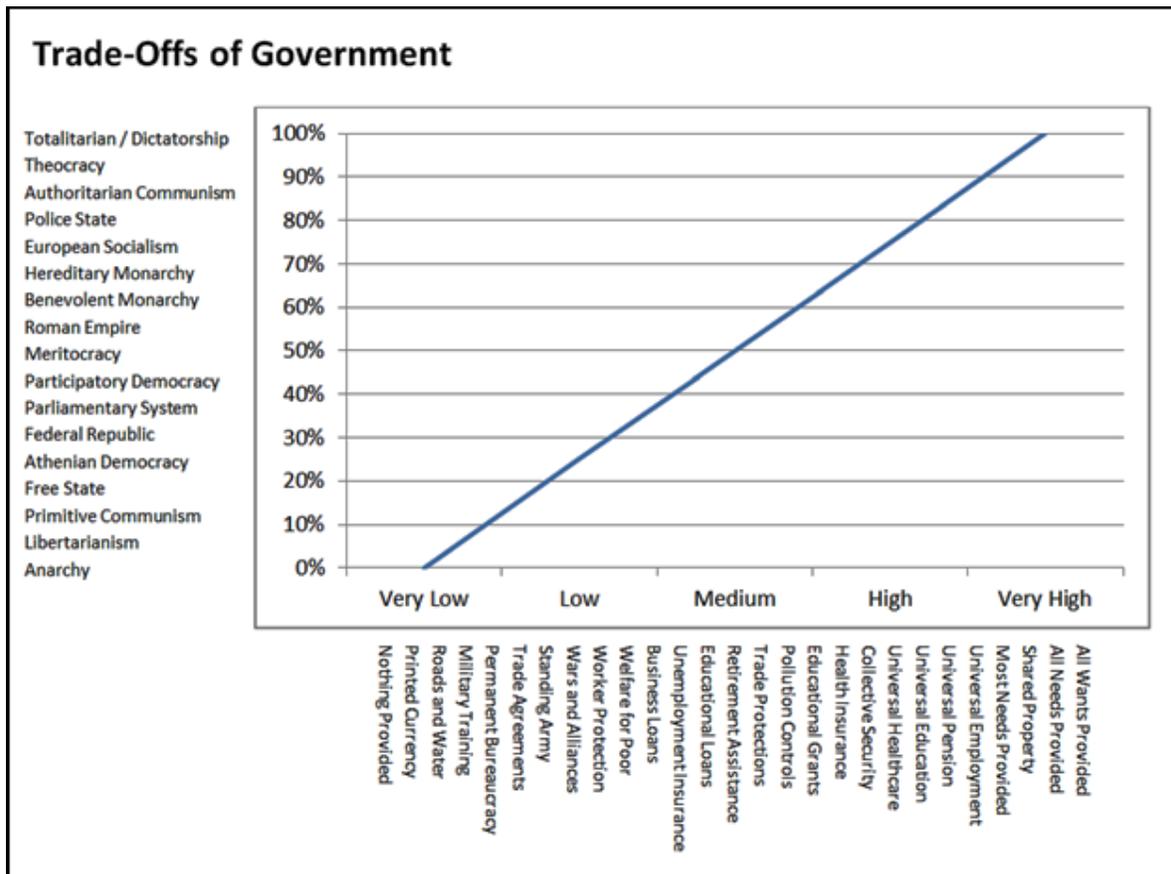


Figure 1. Trade-offs of Government

- Y = Amount of Oppression (low oppression is high personal freedom and liberty)
- X = Amount of Collective Services (provided by the government)
- Line indicates the size of government (relative scale)

This top down model of government lets us make broad assumptions. For example, you might say that governments that are off the line must increase in the factor which is keeping them from occupying their correct size or they will suffer inefficiencies (crime, chaos, corruption, etc.) in proportion to their distance from the line. Alternatively, they can decrease the factor they have in abundance (although historically that does not happen).

However, as with any form of systems design, the devil is in the details and each of these stereotypical systems can vary radically from similar governments in practice.

## 1.2 Corruption

Also common through both real world governments and ludic ones is a tendency towards corruption. People attempt to subvert the intent of rules for their own benefit.

- Bribing
- Nepotism
- Bias to selfish actor when making ambiguous decisions.

### 1.3 What is the end goal of a government in a game?

Governments exist for a purpose. The following are classic examples:

- **Utilitarianism:** What is thriving? How does the government choose this?
- Power and Longevity of the government
- Longevity of the community and culture
- Economic superiority
- Growth through conquest. Manifest destiny.

Games use other variations on these:

- **Extraction of money from players:** Many game systems exist in order to make profits for the owners of the game. In the most extreme version of this, the players are served only to the degree that it results in more real world money being transferred to the game owners. This has parallels with various forms of **mercantilism**.
- **Technological Improvement:** Other games exist merely to prove out some technological ideology. A game like Second Life is strongly motivated by the individualist techno-utopianism promoted by virtual reality enthusiasts.

### 1.4 Limitations of games

Games have additional properties that make the reality of designing systems of governance quite different from that of real governments.

- Games are opt-in and opt-out. Your participation in real world governments is typically greatly influenced by where you live.
- Games use abstracted models where the world is chaotic and confusing.
- The developer bias is more pronounced (may not accurately model Communism)
- The things we want in a game are not the things we want in a real life. In particular the system of values in games are usually artificially designed vs adopted from existing real world cultures..
- Thriving in a game is different than real life. The bottommost sections of Maslow's hierarchy of needs has dramatically less importance.
- Games allow for perfect enforcement of laws through code. Real laws are imperfectly enforced and ultimately dependent on social norms.
- No theoretical limit on scarcity. Sources and sinks economic model vs real scarcity.
- Games allow for the fantasy of clearly defined goals.
- Games allow for the egalitarian promise of fairness. Not so in the real world. Divine Right.
- Developers are often outside the community separated by many layers of abstraction.. Players hate the developers but love the game. In the real world, rulers are often part of the community.
- Developers are god autocrats that make the physical laws of the game universe.
- Games are not a place you live: Through a looking glass version of life. Play in a dystopia vs live in one.

Games operate in a short lasting technology layer atop the real world. As such game governments last relatively short periods of time. Admittedly the same argument can be made about real world governments.

## II. Government in Games

### 2.1 Why would you care about governmental systems?

Every multiplayer game past a certain size begins to organically accumulate the institutions of a government. This occurs because governance is ultimately a name for a systemic toolset for reducing the inevitable friction and enforcing social norms across large groups. Most multiplayer player games are rife with such friction. Left undisturbed by developers, communities will naturally begin accumulating organic guilds, mafias, blacklists, enforcers and other forms of governance as players attempt to manage the anarchy.

We've seen something similar with grassroots economic systems. When game developers first start adding trade to online games, they were shocked to find that complex economic and social institutions spread throughout their games like wildfire. These unofficial economies nearly wrecked each game's carefully designed incentive structure and ended up forming a massive percentage of the long term gameplay. The collapse of Asheron's Call's economy and the rise of gold farming and real money trade as a billion dollar business sounded the alarm that this emergent aspect of game design that should be taken seriously. To build a modern game without also planning out the market places, currencies and other economic structures is now considered the epitome of foolishness.

Government in online games is in a similar place. We see the toxic communities, player protests. We realized that such toxic communities have a direct effect on retention or new player churn. The problem is poor unofficial governance and the solution is good official governance.

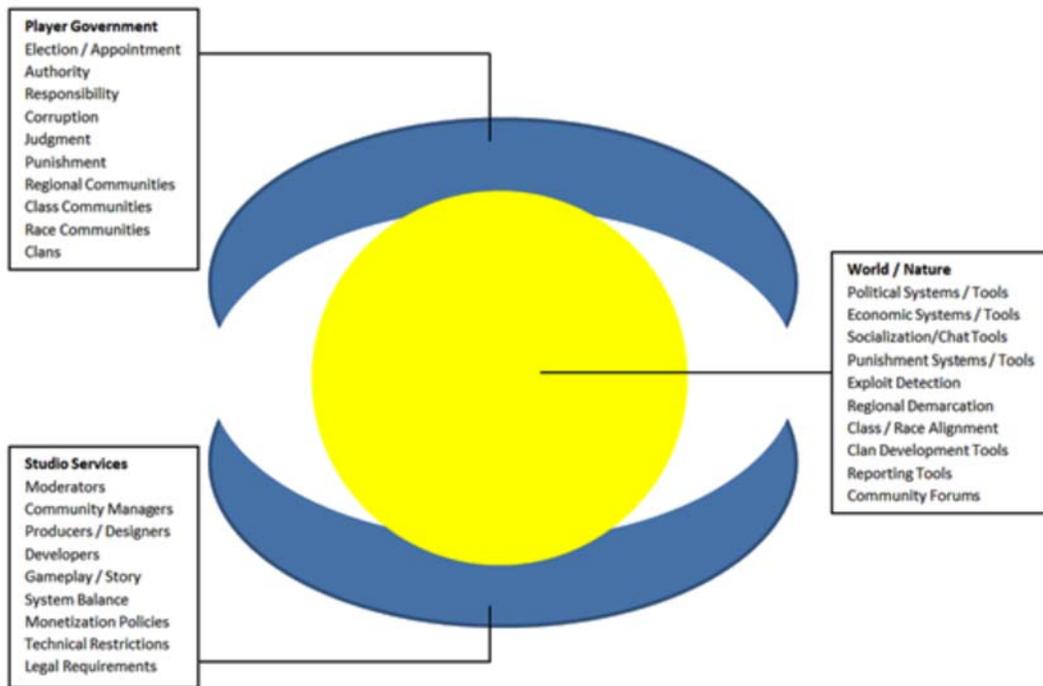
Benefits of good governance are numerous and include:

- Improved retention
- Reduced moderation costs
- Stronger communities
- Respect for the world and its designers. Patriotism, if you will.

On the flip side, bad governance will result on many issues, including:

- Organization that maintain a bad reputation outside the game that in turn dissuades people from joining.
- New users are turned off from the game as entrenched groups consolidate power and reject immigrants.
- Rebellious long term communities of haters spring up that seek to disrupt every positive action by developers.
- If the community is toxic enough, your game ends up being a predominantly negative influence on the player's life.

### 2.2 Government Systems in Games



**Figure 2. Governance: Player based, Designer based**

There are many types of systems that can be embedded within games, including:

- **Legislative systems:** How are rules made? For example, writing code that bans particular words from being used in global chat.
- **Executive systems:** How are rules implemented? For example code that enacts a certain rule or community norms that suggest a certain path of behavior.
- **Judicial systems:** How are spoilers judged and then sentenced to some corrective action?

### 2.3 Process of government organically emerging

There are different types of governance that can emerge, officially and unofficially. The size of the group creates an important influence on the type of governmental system.

With small groups (2-40 participants), unofficial structure appears such as:

- Leadership by acclamation
- Informal rules and norms
- Sharing of roles and little specialization
- Group reporting and censure
- Strong interpersonal relationships.
- Strong variability as people come and go from the group.
- Trust as the defining aspect of interactions.

Past Dunbar's number (80-150 participants) we start to see institutions emerge with more stable governmental systems. Many rules are written down or supported in code. We also see indoctrination of new players into the behavioral codes of conduct, and specialization of roles. There are also interdependencies mediated through trade, status, official positions and other official mechanisms. The group also shows moderate relationships with one another, i.e. not everyone knows everyone.

A key trigger at this stage is the existence of **collective goods**. These are goods such as 'air' where if one person uses it, the rest of the population can still use it. Issues of ownership and maintaining quality

become important and rules spring up around them. One of the most common collective goods is the 'safety' and you'll often see conflict prone games evolving complex systems for guaranteeing and managing the safety of people in the world.

With the emergence of these institutions we witness the spectrum of Unofficial and Official governance. We start to see glimpses of the following:

- Organically emerging structures
- Formation of institutions out of those structures
- Written laws capture norms.
- Deep norms of the worlds are already presenting.
- We see Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing on a large scale level.

As we get past Dunbar's number (greater than 150 participants) we see the following occurs without much interference from the developers. As a designer, you will see the following:

- Economic activity: Scarcity and trade are requirements. Simple drop trading is often enough. An economy is a society's (gamer population's) solution to the problem of endemic scarcity.
- Explicit shared goals: Individuals with interdependencies will begin to self organize around shared goals. They become explicit as players communicate these goals.
- Civility (social norms that reduce social friction): If players can communicate or interact, they will start adopting social norms for good behavior and bad behavior. This is fluid and gameable.
- Hierarchy and Status: If players can compare themselves, they will.

*At this level a government takes some of the pie and, ideally, enacts policies that can*

- *enforce some social order*
- *make the pie bigger*
- *ensure that citizens internalize both the benefits and the costs of their actions*

## 2.4 Targeting the type of government you desire

We identified two main directions for implementing government in games:

- **Minimalist:** A minimalist government that exists in order to minimize the bad effects of a Hobbesian world. The main issue with this kind of government is that developers may create a system that misses key elements that allow corruption to fester and the culture. An extreme example of a minimalist design would be the highly controlled interactions of a Facebook game like Farmville, or a strongly censored interaction system like that found in Journey.
- **Dramatic:** A government that exists to add content, gameplay and drama to the game. The risk with this type of government is that developers may create a giant baroque system. The systems in Ultima Online and Eve fall into this category.

## 2.5 Limits of player involvement in governance

Games are highly technical creations that require expert skills to produce and manage. Direct democracy with players both suggesting and approving via a popular vote feature changes run into several major issues:

- **Tragedy of the commons:** Players act selfishly and end up destroying the key resources or balance. There is no real holistic view.
- **Lack of systems thinking:** The populace is not trained in systems design or thinking.
- **Non-feasible plans:** Certain ideas may sound good, but are impossible to implement.
- **Lack of information:** Many aspects of a complex world are statistical in nature and require deep

diving into the data behind masses of player and system activity. This is not readily understood nor is it easy to reduce to an understandable form. The result is that decisions are made without a strong understanding of the problem space.

- **Non-iterative process:** Requesting a feature is a form of upfront planning. Often developers need to iterate on something many times in smaller experimental situations in order to get it right.
- **Conflicting goals:** Players desire many things such as free entertainment. They generally don't care about profitability, but developers do.

## 2.6 Rights as a lens for building government

There's a thread of governance philosophy that states that there are certain intrinsic rights held by players, designers and managers of an online game. Raph Koster has written of a Bill of Player Rights and concepts like natural rights are the foundation upon which most modern democracies are built.

Our group didn't cover this much, because we've approached this problem from different perspective. The key question we were trying to answer is not "What is the ideal society for all participants" but instead "what are the pragmatic goals of making a more stable, high retention social structure that avoids the negative aspects of bad government?"

From a purely pragmatic perspective, you can interpret the postulation of 'natural rights' as an end run around the question of what gives a particular group the 'right' to hold power over another and what are the limits of those rights. By saying there are natural rights, a society can set hard constraints that are not to be questioned.

The technologist attempting to build a pragmatic government in a very different medium is thus advised to see 'natural rights' as a set of historical best practices that limit rebellion or exodus while releasing social friction between power groups. Since many of these systems have long term feedback loops that are not readily apparent (corruption that accumulates over generations for example), the management lessons contained within the category of natural rights often appear non-intuitive to those with a short term perspective. "Freedom of speech", for example, seems like it adds social disorder when in fact longer term it reduces hidden corruption and highlights important social trends.

## 2.7 Long Term

There are several topics that we didn't get to address in detail. Governance is a procedural concept, not a static artifact. As such, the systems involved will slowly change as their playerbase learns, adapts and cycles out over time. All governance is faded with the question of how to manage this change.

- **Cultural drift:** Government complexity evolves with culture and history and special interests.
- **Divergent interests** between the developers and those they govern: Developers need to react to player behavior.
- **Corruption:** Selfish actors work to rig the system for their own benefit. This in turn causes the game to drift out of balance and occasionally collapse. This can be official corruption where a developer tries to monetize a population and thus destroys their intrinsic motivation (a form of overtaxation). Or it can be unofficial corruption where players use griefing to accumulate bonus resources (a form of banditry)

## III. How games apply to real government

We briefly tackled was how the systemic thinking in games might be applied back to real world governments. There are many mechanics currently in play in real governments. Identifying and

approaching these mechanics with a game system designer's gaze could elicit new insights as the boundaries of possibilities through play are explored. Isolating key issues that affect stability & happiness of the governed in a real-world situation within a game gives policy makers more information to make the decisions they need to make. Game theory used as a tool to study the systems.

### **3.1 Ways games might help real governments**

- Games that highlight and utilizing key macro performance indicators to accurately judge current state of the real world and set direction for new policies that are to improve performance.
- Games that explore conflict between legislation variants and economic variants.
- Games that explore conflicts between incentives of different citizens (How do you decide who should receive the most benefit from a governmental action?)
- Educating the populace on the systemic issues involved in an otherwise polarized topic.
- Propaganda that pushes a particular governmental policy.

### **3.3 Example of educating the public on policy via games**

An Informed Populace (Encouraging Civic Duty, or emphasizing how gerrymandering disenfranchises voters and leads to erratic policy-making). In the case of a democratic form of government, an educated populace is important in maintaining a properly function democracy.

Gerrymandering (or Redistricting) is a complex process that happens behind the scenes, out of view of the public. Politicians vote to cut up and reform districts to help ensure their parties get re-elected. Game theory has modeled this process and game designers have boiled down the issue in the form of a game that is both fun to play and easy to understand. Geometry game of gerrymandering. The redistricting game <http://redistrictinggame.org>

Sim City: City building and management

### **3.4 Looking forward**

We think it is a good idea for policy makers to seek out game system designers to help make information easily accessed and consumed. See next section for more discussion on how.

Additionally, transparency and education of the populace can go hand in hand though simplifications of the game simulations used to model the effects of the potential policy choices, turning them into games that inform the public. If certain segments of the public have been failed by the public education system in education on civics, government structure and its inner-workings, they could play these games to feel more confident in participating in the process. Educating through play can increase the spread of information and it's retention. The societal goal to create more involved citizens could have an effect on the levels of corruption in the different levels and branches of government.

### **3.5 Idea: Making the policy games public**

Pursuing the creation of a single government web portal and app that catalogues all of the distilled/highly consumable games for the public, in addition to the analyzed data from the simulations and the methods used in their development. The goal for this portal is to make it simple for players to try games that improve their understanding of government, as part of a broader move for greater government transparency.

## **IV. Games as a Petri Dish for Understanding Governance**

Understanding how people get organized, how governance emerges, dissipates, and gets replaced by other organized structures are important questions that have impact on many fields, including social science, policy making, political science, governance bodies and rules, etc. Current work in fields such as social science or social psychology, provide general theories of the individual, such as psychology of emotions, personality, or cognition, or more theoretical or philosophical work that explain societal structures, such as Mann's 4 social power structures [Mann 1945-2011]. Or, in economics for example, there is very well-defined theory concerning the effect of investment in education on long-term outcomes (income, criminality, fertility), as well as substantial empirical evidence describing strength of the effect of that investment on those outcomes.

In contrast to the relatively settled theory on individual behavior, theories on societal actions are diverse, in flux, and is the source of important divisions in many social science fields. This is the result of a serious gap between our knowledge of the individual or small social groups and formation of governance and societal structures. This division is symbolic of society's difficulty with even defining the relevant "problem set". There's a recognition that solutions evolve from the perceptions and decisions of millions of individuals, but there is little agreement on the mechanics and results of that process. Simplification enables reasoning at the expense of explanation.

*Games provide an environment where we can understand these theories and experiment with governance structures and their effect on individuals and societies -- games as experimental platforms for social science.*

Using games as experimental platforms, we envision various approaches. One approach is to generate a wide set of possible governance structures through variations in mechanics associated with communication, rules for rewards and punishments, rules for formations, social norms, reputation systems, etc. Another approach is to start with a minimalistic governance design and see how governance structures evolves through observing large groups of people interact within an MMO. A third approach is to use a specific platform, such as Minecraft, and add specific models of government or governance structures, such as socialism, and observe and analyze players' behaviors and social group and rule formations.

In order to measure and observe players' behaviors, a system for analyzing player behavior is needed. With the rise of game telemetry and analytics approaches [Seif El-Nasr 2013], we can easily track player behaviors and analyze group and individual behaviors over time. This allows us to answer many open questions, such as how individuals get organized based on structures that we encode or mechanics we supply, what are the cause and effect of social policies, and how can we understand and contextualize social powers, such as military, economic, ideology, and political discussed by Mann.

However, one of the major drawbacks of this approach is the issue of validity or assessment of theories formulated using this approach. A game as a platform is a new methodology for experimenting with several issues around governance. However, the instrument (the game) or the resulting structures need to be validated based as compared to other methodological structures that currently exist.

A related issue is deciding what kinds of problems to ask. The answer must come from a dialogue between designers and social scientists that attempts to resolve the trade-offs between the grandness of a question, the validity of our test of that question, and the value of the answer to everyone involved - developers, players, scientists, and indeed all of society. Scientist-as-incrementalist, designers-as-visionary, and policy-maker-as-serious problem solver can mutually benefit from one another, and a well-designed experiment is the portal through which these benefits can be realized.

Despite the limitations games present, the extreme flexibility the platform also has benefits in allowing us to think differently about governance structures in games and outside, as it expands our palette to view other possibilities that we may not have thought of before. Thus, allowing us to innovate and break from the current norm. The cost of testing a new form of government in the real world is enormous, and so

most political science theories remain entirely untested at scale. Player populations in a game world could provide the data to test those hypotheses, whether they are minute variations on election procedures or entirely novel systems designed from scratch.

Beyond the benefits for researchers, there is also a potential for this experimental approach to enrich the governmental literacy of the playerbase in general. One can imagine game environments that move the rules of the in-game government to the forefront, highlighting the ramifications of each variation, and challenging the players to internalize forces at work. First hand participation in a novel governmental system could serve as an engaging new mechanic in a commercial game or a thought-provoking message in a serious game.

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## Appendix: Brainstorming Notes

### Example games

- Poaching game: Track down people
- A tale in the desert: Crafting heavy, Tellings, Egyptian culture. Players vote on stuff that is then implemented as Law. Teppy.
- Story of NPC not trading with women. How does the community react? What rules and laws do they make.
- Dwarf Fortress: Procedural government.
- Wolf Pack: People playing for. Might is right. Early government and how they evolved. Collective power as resistance to the strong individuals. Ganging up on those who are stronger. Tyranny of the individuals.
- Eve Council: Advising culture.
- Flagging someone red PVP that players can kill because he was a gold farmer.
- Gold farmer is part of the community, however.
- Use of e-sports top players as community standards that others emulate. Norms such as good or bad manners.
- Bureaucracy: Politics, entrenched power. Papers please. However, this is thematic and single

player.

## Issues

- Voting doesn't make sense from a game design perspective. Low agency, convoluted.
- Where is the line between the decision making and the bureaucracy. Who has power.
- How much power does the game designer have. How much do they give away to the player and / publisher.
- Identify all the inputs that go into designing a government for a game. Who is the developers? Are the developers are the legislators? Who makes judicial decisions?
- Four social powers: Economic, Political, Ideological, Military.
- Participation is voluntary in game.
- Government is an exchange for collective liberty for collective benefit
- As a community, negotiating trade-offs. People can rent seek and game them. Hard to tell the results because the long term responses.
- In the real government there is only one world. Hard to experiment on it.
- Stopping corruption. Erosion of the balance of power.
- Scarcity is part of a government in game.
- Taking a contract on your own player. Players have taken a contract out on another player.
- Transparency of the system.
- Accounting for variability. Pain / Pleasure system.
- Inability to decrease the size of the government. Stability vs noise and revolution.
- Dictatorship with open borders.
- Unofficial governance: Gray market vs gray governance.
- Alternate: Non-gang powers show up. Socializing is more of a concept instead of government.
- One data point so hard to compare and have counterfactual evidence.
- Traffic cameras have no soul. Human-based outlet as a judicial.
- Why isn't there democracy in online games: Reaching group consensus via system:
- Right way to play that emerges: Ethical choices. Coop vs selfish.
- Negative Externality: Create a cost that we don't experience.
- Economics perspective: Policy makers as designers. Players as rational actors. (actors are not rational!)
- Asymmetrical roles:
- Factions: Winning for the greater good
- Developers are government. How do you manage the populace?
- How to simulate government: Biases become very visible.
- How to teach people about
- Draw Players attention to rules and system of government
- System of community: Ex: Hidden Voting
- What are the components of government.

## Opportunities

- Game designer thinking applied to existing government.
- Basic income policy:
- Objectives: Satisfy some players, money and other objectives.
- Incentivizing the players through governmental structures: Election mechanic in a game.
- Let people get invested in the game and then put the yoke of government on them. Guild single player
- Might do things in a virtual environment that you wouldn't do in the real world because the consequences are not the same.
- Important decisions going in, focus on entertainment through modeling aspects of government or is education on governmental systems the primary goal?

- Government using games a propaganda.
- Games that compete with government.
- Punishment systems: Banning, bounties
- If we create a structured government for the game, we could have the different Bartle piece serve one another and make each other happy. Battles driven by strategists and governing people would govern conquer territories. People could invest in other's successes. Bet on players. Goal: With a particular government structure we can increase overall happiness via more connection.
- How can game let you experience systems and compare and contrast. vs Wikipedia.
- Get first hand experience with various government systems. Experiment without Feature X or with Feature Y.
- What about an Enders Game version of government: Lots of simulation and then we pick one of the results secretly and implement it.

## Other interesting petri dishes that riff on government

- 1984 the Game
- Rogue Government
- MMO where some servers are straight up better.
- Explore different government models with games.
- How do we align games as money makers with games that help people thrive.
- Increased power with age but weaker with age.
- Satire of government

## Existing government types that emerge organically

- Communes
- Burning Man
- Artificial Nation states: Mini nation Seasteading.

## Goals

- Gross National Happiness: Utilitarianism. Preference Utilitarianism. Positive Psychology: Thriving. Eudaimonic vs Hedonic happiness.
- Gross National Product
- Individual success
- Honoring the gods

## Game goals

- Winning more battles than you lose
- Having more money than your neighbor.
- Retention
- Revenue / Profit.
- Do no harm:
- Experimental data: Optimizing for Fame, Money or Happiness. The results of the experiment: 30, 30, 30%...even results.

## Propaganda and media

Egypt: Media made a big role of channeling people to two opposing groups.

## Data collection

- Analytics as Census: Bureaucracy collects data to aid in policy making. Interpretation of data.
- We have metrics. What sort of data do we need to make a better government.

## Who should participate

Randomly grab 20 people, brainwipe and drop people back into the government. Rawlsian, veil of Ignorance.

- Jury duty-style. Get rid of politician / government as a profession.
- Can people judge complex systems? What decisions can people understand and make rational decisions on.
- Technocrat
- Lobbyists
- Smart people, ill equipped for politics
- Scientists

Emergence of government from base generative seeds. Minimum requirements of governments.

- Personal Norms
- Contracts (
- Communication: Journey
- Group size? -> Leads to complexity and hierarchy.
- Resources and tools: Something to manage. Everyone else's time. Scarcity.
- Interdependencies.
- Violence and enforcement tools.
- Emergent behavior (Result of all this)
- How does the emergence of government structures influence the development of the game.

## Government in games

- Call of Duty: Voting for maps
- Eve:
- Collusion: Alliance building and working together. Travian (MMORTS)
- Hierarchical
- Gifting and taxes up the chain.
- Clash of Clans: Emergent taxing. Minimal gifting. If you don't contribute, you get kicked out.
- Survivor: Alliance under duress.
- Democracy 3:
- Nomic: Legislative rule making. Stone Librande's game. How difficult a rule is to change.
- Werewolf: Politics, collusion, Traitors (corruptions)
- Diplomacy: Government to government, strategy.
- Cooperative games: Imperial 2030 (investors in government)
- Guilds in MMOs.
- League of Legends: Judicial system.
- Law enforcement via players catching the
- Hunting gold farmers
- Mods in MMOs: Naughty language.
- Train: Also thematic. Comment on
- Groups that form outside of the game, not inside the game. Clan.

- Sports: The code. The explicit rules and unspoken. Too important to write them down. Fighting in Hockey. So dangerous so you hit the non-star player.
- Rollerball: Often the rule breaking
- Wii vote.
- Godus: Player god who makes policy.

## Debate

- Games as revolutionary tool. Create a new government to test/prove out before going radical. Government is currently
- Games are escapism.
- Should government use games a propaganda.
- Games as a tool to draw out energy of activists, slow down group growth and track area of dissent