

## The Recruitment Game

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**A communication tool based on video games, the “serious game” is increasingly being used by companies for a variety of purposes, including marketing, training and recruitment. This article shows how these games help to develop and share values and standards for the business world.**

The enthusiasm companies are showing for serious games has become apparent over the past five years. There are now countless businesses and institutions that rely on this type of communication tool and see the video game as a new means of developing and sharing their messages. This is clear from the variety of purposes for which serious games are being used: marketing, training, awareness-raising, recruitment, and so on.

Serious games can be defined primarily as communication tools based on video games. They are the outcome of an order placed by a company or institution with a communications agency, e-learning agency or creative studio. The producers of serious games are highly diverse, as can be seen from the list of exhibitors at the Serious Game Expo held annually in Lyon for the past nine years. Among those represented are e-learning businesses that have incorporated serious games into their online training provision, small studios developing video games, which see serious games as a more reliable financial model than the creation of games for entertainment (given that serious games are linked to a specific order), communications agencies and even edutainment businesses.

In France, a wide range of actors have become involved in producing serious games, the creation of which was stimulated by the recovery plan for the digital economy in 2009 and its serious gaming aspect. These played an important role in the socio-economic landscape. The aim of the serious gaming side of the recovery plan was both to help structure the French serious game sector and develop partnerships between research laboratories and businesses (48 serious game projects have been given funding of up to €600,000)<sup>1</sup>. The list of funded projects is evidence of the broad range of aims covered by serious games: supporting medical or therapeutic practices (*CLES*, a platform for neuropsychologists and speech therapists); the use of serious games in the field of education (*Donjons & Radon*, a role play game that raises students' awareness of physical science); analysing professional skills (with the *MISIVIAS*, software); raising public awareness on major issues (*Plateforme jeux citoyens* [Citizens' Games Platform] a series of games about water, created for the Unesco); introducing the public to current affairs issues (*September 12<sup>th</sup>*, a critical game on the consequences of 9/11 for American military policy); and even training for specific professions (*SIMADVF*, a training game for childminders).

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<sup>1</sup>The list of projects can be consulted in the archives of the Directorate General for Competitiveness, Industry and Services (DGCIS): <http://archives.dgcis.gouv.fr/2012/www.industrie.gouv.fr/tic/volet-numerique/aap-serious-game.html>.

In this article we reflect on the definition of serious games and the research currently being done in the field. We shall try to demonstrate the need to focus on the specific mediations of this type of tool in order to understand its practices and uses. This requires an ability to understand the developmental processes that are promoted by serious gaming and the way in which the player-learner manages these. It is also necessary to take a step back from the euphoric discourse that considers games as *de facto* learning tools. After presenting some current research on serious games, this article will focus on a certain type of serious game: serious games in the field of recruitment. How can video games become a recruitment tool? A study of three serious games for recruitment purposes shows how these tools are used to promote the “employer brand”, but above all how they help to develop and share values and standards on professional “know-how” and “is-ought”.

### **What is a serious game?**

Although the term was popularised thanks to the success of the serious games industry, as Julian Alvarez and Damien Djaouti point out in their book *Introduction aux serious games* [An Introduction to Serious Games] (2010)<sup>2</sup>, it was in fact Clark Abt who coined the term in the 1970s in his book of the same title.

The term “serious game” can be very informative to those trying to learn about this medium: the adjective “serious” describes the noun “game” and transforms its purpose. The oxymoronic aspect of the term has often been highlighted: the combination of game and learning, however, is consistent with promises of popularisation and what Yves Jeanneret has called the “seduction of play”, which refers to “the idea that enjoyment and games are a privileged means of establishing communicative effectiveness in the relationship with knowledge”<sup>3</sup>. The serious game is often thought of as a recent tool, although it is actually part of a long history in the relationship between playing and learning.

Pierre Moeglin has shown how the definition of the serious game (associating serious and playful aspects) given by its inventor is part of a political and economic framework that aims to define models for action and for society<sup>4</sup>. These videogame tools contain representations of our organisations and means of co-existing. They offer a chance to experience certain actions and therefore constitute spaces in which values and standards are passed on.

The definitions of the term that are put forward often reveal its apparent duality by grouping game with form on the one side, and “serious” with purpose on the other. With this in mind, Julian Alvarez and Damien Djaouti established an [online platform](#), following the publication of their book, for the classification of serious games. This classification provides a database for industrial and scientific professionals in the industry. Their purpose is twofold: on the one hand, to implement the suggested classification and, on the other, to benchmark through the collaborative addition of new products. The grid provides a classification of their gameplay, purpose, field of application and public. Gameplay is key to any videogame tool: it not only establishes the rules of the game but also the player’s interaction. The type of gameplay is based first of all on the distinction between *game* and *toy*. The former is identified by the purpose assigned to it. Ten different game mechanisms are then put forward

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<sup>2</sup> Julian Alvarez and Damien Djaouti, *Introduction aux serious games*, Éditions Questions théoriques, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Berry & Labelle (ed.), *Le jeu, le sérieux et l'apprentissage. Regards croisés sur le serious game*, Editions Questions théoriques, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

according to the modes of action offered by the videogame product (managing a site or moving an object, for example). The aim is to present the types of game that are identified and, in a way, to assert the fact that the serious game belongs to the game world.

This classification highlights the way in which games are used to convey a message. It is made from the perspective of the product and remains descriptive: whether or not the product is a game or a toy depends on the tool having a recognisable gameplay mechanic. This type of classification is useful for developing an awareness of the diversity of existing tools, but we believe that further studies are required in order to make a more in-depth analysis of the relationship established between gameplay and pedagogy in order to bring out a playful approach in the player-learner at the time of learning.

[In our most recent studies](#)<sup>5</sup>, we did not seek to classify serious games but, instead, to examine their media and communication specifics by basing our research on our experience of designing serious games. In particular, we demonstrated the importance of mediations in this type of communication tool in order to defend the idea that games should not be seen as a structure to be filled in with knowledge. Nor should learning be concealed behind a graphic world reminiscent of video games or behind playful mechanisms that have a tenuous link with the message. To our mind, learners should always be aware that they are situated within a learning environment and that the appropriation of knowledge cannot take place unbeknownst to them but rather with their cooperation.

Our design experience led us to establish a number of proposals with the aim of considering jointly play-based development and the gathering and categorising of information. It is the media specificities of video games, in other words their gameplay, that are useful here. We chose to base our analysis on the widely used collection principle in order to increase the learner's involvement in the process of identifying important information. The learning content is presented in labels within dialogues or as objects within the game space: learners must click on them in order to place them inside their notebook. The action of collecting thus requires learners to be aware of the nature of the information and their own role in the progression of the game. The label is an object that can be manipulated and used in gaming modules in order to reconstruct diagrams and maps. Thus, by giving certain objects a playful role (the game consists in finding and collecting the set of objects) as well as an informative status (the action of categorising information in a new context), mediation plays a role in the learning process and, more generally, in spreading messages. Games are not just put at the service of learning but, rather, are a component of the pedagogical activity.

Defining serious games thus calls for a critical analysis of the supposed pedagogical and communications revolution that accompanies them and suggests that games not only encourage learners' involvement but also their success. Pierre Moeglin also highlights the degree to which "this use of games is related to the postmodern ideal of the creative subject, ready at all times to seize the opportunities that present themselves in order to put them to the service of the project that he has mapped out for himself".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Labelle & Seurrat, "Serious game et réécriture des savoirs : hétérogénéité des médiations documentaires", in *Diversification et renouvellement des médiations* (eds J. Boustany, E. Broudoux, G. Chartron), proceedings of the 4th conference "Document numérique et société", Zagreb, 2013, "Information & Stratégie" Collection, De Boeck Editions, pp. 185-198.

<sup>6</sup> Berry & Labelle, op.cit.

## **Studies on serious games in France: between research and design**

In France, many research services and laboratories are involved in designing serious games and have even won prizes awarded by international juries, such as [I-CARE](#), designed by UFR Ingémédia for Eurocopter – La Garde (France) at the [e-virtuoses](#) international conference held in Valenciennes.

Research and innovation is given a prominent role in public policy and in agencies and research centres. Whether they are part of the call for projects issued within the framework of the recovery plan for the digital economy or calls issued by the National Research Agency, two aspects stand out: first, the aim is to produce tools and applications; second, partnerships between laboratories and private organisations are given priority. Consequently research is done as part of a new framework that calls for a reflection on the link between knowledge production and the production of specific tools. It is the epistemological aspect of research that has changed. The challenge for researchers is therefore not only to carry out basic research but also productive research. That research results in a tool that is not only developed from knowledge but one that could potentially acquire a social use. In May 2013, the [Salon de la Valorisation](#) organised by the Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (Innovatives SHS) showed – by its popularity and the sheer number of projects presented – how important it is for laboratories to be able to give their projects a long-term and fruitful social operativeness. The question of the “transfer” or “promotion” of a project thus becomes clear through the use of products or services by third parties or a target public.

Many laboratories are taking this approach, which has given rise to digital productions and new partnerships: Kompany (University of Poitiers, Ouat Entertainment), Notre-Dame Retrouvée (University of Caen, Manche Numérique and [various partners](#)), [Eonautes](#) (Laboratoire Cultures et Sociétés en Europe, Almédia), La Serre Numérique ([CCI Grand Hainault](#) and SupInfocom Group). These projects are characterised by a desire to use the knowledge and know-how of research in order to create a tool that can be useful in a wide range of fields: history, evaluation methods, learning processes, etc. Kompany, for example, introduces secondary-school pupils to the world of business; Notre Dame Retrouvée is part of a historical and touristic service provided for the inhabitants and visitors to the town of Saint-Lô; La Serre Numérique aims to create an employment basin specialised in video games by serving teaching establishments and businesses in the sector<sup>7</sup>.

By way of illustrating how different communications issues overlap within these media tools, we shall provide three examples of serious games in the field of recruitment.

### **Serious games and recruitment**

Serious games in the field of recruitment are among a variety of tools that facilitate an encounter between a company and a future employee. The methods used for recruitment – a period during which two entities become aware of and acknowledge each other’s abilities and

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<sup>7</sup> Following the DGCIS (Directorate General for Competitiveness, Industry and Services) call for projects, we also led a project in consortium with an e-learning business through the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme – Paris Nord. The project, known as *ManEGe* (Management Energy Game), was conducted from December 2009 to January 2012 and resulted in the creation of a serious game prototype whose aim was to help people understand a wind power development project. When developing the project, we wanted to be fully integrated in the area of research and innovation, and we therefore tried to reflect on the technological products used (3D, game engines, etc.) and the implications in terms of producing a learning situation. Our involvement in communication sciences led us to question serious games as a media tool and the relationship between support, materiality of information and communication intentions. Our work thus consisted in highlighting a rigorously reflexive stance that is consistent with the co-production of pedagogical scenarios and play-based mechanisms.

affinities – have changed along with media developments<sup>8</sup>; in other words, the changes that have taken place in the media and therefore the use that is made of tools in the social practice of recruitment. It is not very common for companies to decide to use serious games as a phase of recruitment; nevertheless, given that a number of major French companies use them, presumably corporations feel that this type of tool has the capacity to redefine the social situation of recruitment and convey a company's message. Serious games have specific media features that enable several messages to be shared. To gain an insight into the forms and functions of this polyphony, we shall look at three important examples: Moonshield by Thalès, Reveal by l'Oréal and Energy Task Force by EDF.

Reveal is a recruitment game used by L'Oréal. It was launched in January 2010 and has been renewed annually ever since. It can be accessed through a [dedicated English-language website](#). Designed by TMP Worldwide, it aims to recruit future interns and young graduates internationally and is used for all existing jobs at L'Oréal. If players want the chance to be interviewed by the company, they must finish the game, which takes around ten hours.

Players take on the role of a young manager arriving at L'Oréal. They meet different project managers (marketing, R&D, finance, etc.) who set them tasks to complete and give them information and documents. The tasks are spread across several areas: finance, marketing, R&D, industry and supply chain, business development and the cafeteria. It is worth noting that the cafeteria is a vital area in the game, because players will meet a large number of characters and make connections. Through these different tasks, which usually take the form of reading activities and quizzes, players are encouraged to “reveal their talents” by familiarising themselves with the company's corporate culture and the range of jobs available at L'Oréal.

It goes without saying that Reveal presents information about jobs at L'Oréal and the company's corporate culture in particular, but the gaming side of the tool is also worth analysing. As is often the case with serious games, the playful and the virtual are merged. The experience of being immersed in a digital tool is presented as being playful in itself. For, as we highlighted earlier, the media potential of video games is linked to its “gameplay” and its “playability” (in other words, what determines the player's modes of action within the tool). How far a player advances in the game depends entirely on reading texts and being able to answer quiz questions. Once the game is over, players receive personalised feedback, which pinpoints their qualities, flaws, skills and shortcomings. The tool then takes on the role of an advisor, telling candidates which professions suit them the best (candidates are prompted at the start of the game: “Know yourself better” and “Now, who will you be?”). The company is presented as an auxiliary who enables player-candidates to “reveal themselves” and discover their professional skills and strengths. The top players are invited to spend two days at the L'Oréal headquarters in Paris in order to meet managers and attend interviews.

In contrast with Reveal, the Thalès group's game, Moonshield, is not a realistic simulation of the corporate world but rather a science fiction game. Designed by KTM Advance, it was launched in autumn 2008 and adapted for smartphones in 2010. It is an online management and strategy game developed in Flash. Players manage a military base on the moon where Thalès technologies help them to deflect a meteor shower that is threatening

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<sup>8</sup> See Gwenolé Guiomard and Pascale Kroll, “Le Guide des professionnels du recrutement”, *Les éditions du management*, February 2014.

Earth. Thalès experts appear during the game to explain how to use Thalès technology to maximum effect. Moonshield is much shorter than Reveal, with one part lasting from a few minutes to half an hour. Players can lose fairly easily and then restart the game, which distinguishes the game from others such as Reveal, which a priori can only be played once. Moonshield plunges players into a post-apocalyptic world and gives them the role of a hero (managing the moon base) responsible for saving humanity. Unlike Reveal, Moonshield is not designed for all young graduates; instead, it specifically targets young engineers. In order to understand the game it is therefore necessary to have prior knowledge of science and engineering (calculating speed, analysing the meteorites' path, using advanced Thalès technologies, etc.). The gameplay also includes a shooting phase with targets (asteroids) and weapons (missile launchers). Players' scores increase according to their capacity to develop their base, manage the resources available and protect the Earth and the moon from falling asteroids. Poor management of the base causes a collision, after which the game is over. A list of players' scores is shown at the end and the top players are called for an interview with a human resources manager at Thalès.

Like Moonshield, EDF's Energy Task Force<sup>9</sup> also targets young engineers. It is worth noting that young engineers are a priority public for serious games, given that their age and professional specialty are seen as factors that increase a video game's appeal. Unlike Reveal and Moonshield, however, Energy Task Force was a short-term game. It was a serious game released between January and February 2011, and targeted engineering students in France, Belgium, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain and Italy. Students were asked to form teams of four people and sign up on the dedicated Moonshield website or Facebook page. For three weeks, teams had to complete three challenges, which were in turn divided into five tasks. Although players signed up as a team, they played as a single character and were unable to interact with other teams. The tool was very similar to the corporate tasks set in business and engineering schools, when students are asked to solve practical cases after which they receive corrections by email. The challenges corresponded to three main axes of EDF's strategy: to design, produce and better consume energy. For each task, players had to answer questions, make choices through quizzes and fill in tables. The data to be processed was related to strategic issues (energy choices), technical issues (understanding the different ways to produce and store electricity) and financial issues (calculating cost-effectiveness). Much like Reveal, the Energy Task Force gameplay was fairly limited because the only thing players were required to do was click on objects or characters that provided information and then fill in tables. Once they had completed the three tasks, teams were ranked and, as well as having the chance to do an internship at EDF, the top team won a trip to Laos to visit EDF's Nam Theun 2 hydroelectric dam.

As we can see, serious games for recruitment purposes vary in their form, target public, videogame type and method of semiotizing the corporate world or sector. Nevertheless, they all establish a link between the communication issues found in recruitment and those in institutions; above all, however, they construct a model of an ideal type employee who experiences the company through an epic game.

### **The corporation experienced as an epic game**

It goes without saying that winning a serious game for recruitment purposes does not guarantee a job in the company. It is simply a new way of making contact with the company

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<sup>9</sup> This game is analysed at greater length in Luc Ploquin and Aude Seurrat, "Le secteur de l'énergie au prisme du jeu vidéo", H<sup>2</sup>PTM 2011: Hypermédias et pratiques numériques, conference held from 12-14 October 2011 at Paul Verlaine University – Metz; proceedings published by Hermès Science Publications, October 2011.

and trying to obtain an interview. As was the case with the three games presented earlier, serious games have a dual purpose (successfully completing the game and getting a job), but doing well in the first quest (finishing the game with the highest possible score) is only one stage in the successful completion of the second quest, which consists in obtaining an internship or position within the corporation. So why do large companies invest in this type of tool when they have no shortage of candidates? According to an [EDF press release](#), the aim of Energy Task Force was to boost EDF's attractiveness, strengthen its international reputation and give young engineers an opportunity to get to know the company. It immediately became clear that the logic of communication became more fragmented and the recruitment message was weakened.

The serious games analysed here all link a recruitment strategy with a strategy to enhance the company's image. The aim is to find talented young people, make sure they are familiar with the company and compatible with its corporate culture, while giving off an image of an attractive, young, dynamic employer. This strategy corresponds to what is known as an "employer brand" strategy. For Simon Barrow and Richard Mosley, the employer brand is related to the brand and is what enables a group to stand out from the crowd in terms of employability when trying to attract, recruit and/or retain workers. The aim is to attract individuals who identify with the brand, adopt its values and will thrive in the working environment that can be inferred from the values and commitment being promoted by the company<sup>10</sup>. Serious games thus give companies the chance to decide which communicative aim they wish to prioritise. While the recruitment process is clearly the primary objective of the communication tool, there is an underlying desire to put forward a particular discourse on the company, its social role and working environment.

In the three serious games analysed here, the companies are considered leaders in their field (cosmetics, energy and aerospace). This shows through the discourses used in the serious game as well as (and this is unique to this type of tool) through the visuals and the scenario. In *Reveal*, for example, the representation of the company's spatial universe and its employees is characterised by the use of a space that is both simple and sophisticated. Indeed, the places and characters are particularly aestheticised and each individual character has a carefully designed appearance. In *Moonshield*, Thalès technologies save the world. And finally, in *Energy Task Force*, EDF is shown as being the sole actor in the energy field in France and no mention is made of the fact that the market was recently opened up to competition.

Furthermore, as is the case in many serious games, *Reveal* and *Energy Task Force* present the image of a responsible "corporate citizen" by incorporating respect for the environment, use of "responsible" suppliers and respect for team diversity into the tasks given to players. The companies present themselves as "corporate citizens". For Nicole D'Almeida, this notion of corporate citizenship "serves as a linguistic mirage which, in a single term, reconciles two very different worlds and orders: the economic world of private interests and the political world as a sphere of public interest"<sup>11</sup>. The discourses used in the serious games studied here cleverly combine corporate, political and individual objectives.

Serious games for recruitment also help to construct the image of an ideal employee. In *Reveal*, the player-candidate embodies an intern hero who must take on a variety of strategic tasks. However, these do not correspond to the actual tasks entrusted to company

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<sup>10</sup> Simon Barrow, Richard Mosley, *The Employer Brand*, England, John Wiley & Sons, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Nicole D'Almeida, *L'entreprise à responsabilité illimitée*, Editions Liaisons, 1996, p. 56.

interns, who are not assigned key duties such as launching a new product. The ideal type candidate for L'Oréal is perfectly familiar with the company, versatile and compatible with its corporate culture and, in particular, with the requirement to carry out networking, which serves as a perfect example of how to be everywhere at once.

Energy Task Force also conveys an ideal type employee. Technology and, more specifically, R&D play a leading role in the game, which is surely out of step with the actual work carried out by an EDF engineer. Most of the tasks involve “future energies”, and the question of how to manage existing infrastructures barely features. In addition, engineering students are required to make strategic decisions which, in actual fact, are made by the company's top management.

Finally, in Moonshield, players are invited to take on the role of a superhero who holds the fate of all humanity in their hands. In this respect, serious games for recruitment purposes construct a kind of epic mission through which the company can be accessed, which praises the exploits of employees and their membership of a group.

Serious games are therefore important media objects enabling us to comprehend the link between representation systems and standards systems. They encourage us to examine the axiologies they convey, in other words their ways of prioritising values. These axiologies are not necessarily obvious: they may be conveyed through the game functioning, gameplay and methods of evaluating performance<sup>12</sup>. One area that continues to raise a number of questions concerns the practices and uses of videogame tools. This requires us to understand the developmental processes that are promoted by serious gaming and the way in which the player-learner manages these. It also obliges us to take a step back from the euphoric discourses that consider games as *de facto* learning tools. Questions concerning the use of serious games and their social operativeness challenge the mediation processes offered by these tools, and thus provide an area of research that needs to be deepened and formalised.

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<sup>12</sup> For Julien Rueff, these electronic media resemble “discourse universes” that “incorporate both consciously and unconsciously referents that are unique to specific cultures as well as value judgments on the (material or symbolic) realities of our daily lives”, [Julien Rueff, “Où en sont les ‘game studies’?”, \*Réseaux\*, 2008/5, n° 151, p.144.](#)