

1979 Revolution - Black Friday

Estela Oliva and Mandy George

Date: Aug 2019

Project name: 1979 Revolution: Black Friday

Project owner: iNK Stories

Release date: 2016

Locale: USA, worldwide except Iran

Languages: English, Spanish, French, German, Russian, Turkish

URL: <http://1979revolutiongame.com/>

XR medium: Video game

Hazards: Conflict

Activity: Awareness

Age group: +17



Table of Contents

#1 PROJECT BACKGROUND	P3
#2 AIMS & RATIONALE	P4
#3 AUDIENCE	P4
#4 EXPERIENCE	P5
#5 TECHNOLOGY	P10
#6 PRODUCTION & DISTRIBUTION	P11
Funding	
Controversy	
BLINDFOLD	
#7 OUTCOMES AND FUTURE PLANNING	P13
Key learnings	
User feedback online	
Future plans	
#8 INTERNAL EVALUATION AND LEARNINGS	P16
Process	
Product and features	
Content	
Scalability	
Key Learnings of Relevance for SBDRR	

#1

Project Background

1979 Revolution: Black Friday is an award winning interactive video game created and published by New York studio iNK Stories, run by Navid and Vassili Khonsari. The game transports players to the Iran of 1978, where they become a journalist who gets involved in the intense events of the Iranian Revolution and are forced to make decisions to determine the narrative and the story. The game is based on true stories and historical events.

1979 Revolution: Black Friday was in development for four years, the first two years for funding and the next two years to develop it. Initially launched on Kickstarter in 2013, it did not initially achieve its funding goal.¹ A second round of fundraising proved more successful and funding was achieved thanks to donors and private investors. The game was released in 2016.

1979 Revolution combines elements from video games and documentaries with an engaging narrative. Game director Navid Khonsari, the mastermind behind renowned game titles such as *Grand Theft Auto*, was born in Iran and lived there during the time of the Revolution. He developed the game with the intention of making players understand the moral ambiguity of the conflict, in which decisions

have to be taken on the go.

The project has been highly acclaimed by critics and has received many nominations awards including the Facebook Game of the Year 2017 and a nomination to the Bafta Games.

¹ <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1817380887/1979-revolution-black-friday>

#2

Aims & Rationale

Created for mass audiences, *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* aims to create a gaming experience connected to real world events and historical milestones of the Iranian history. It was designed to act as a catalyst for creating awareness and positive social change.

The goal of the project, according to director Khonsari, was to both entertain and engage players. iNK Stories wanted to

deliver an “honest depiction” of the Iranian Revolution, but also to put players who are not familiar with it in the shoes of a person who is experiencing that event themselves.²

² <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1817380887/1979-revolution-black-friday>

#3

Audience

1979 Revolution was conceived as a game for mass audiences. The creators aim to reach as many people as possible around the world. From the nature of the game, which includes violence and conflict scenes, the game has been rated for +18 years in the Oculus Store, however the rating on the Apple App store is +17. The total number of downloads is said to be 500K by the creators, and there is a monthly download rate of 841 as of June 2019 as captured in Crunchbase.

The game has been translated into six languages including English, French, German, Spanish, Russian and Turkish.

#4

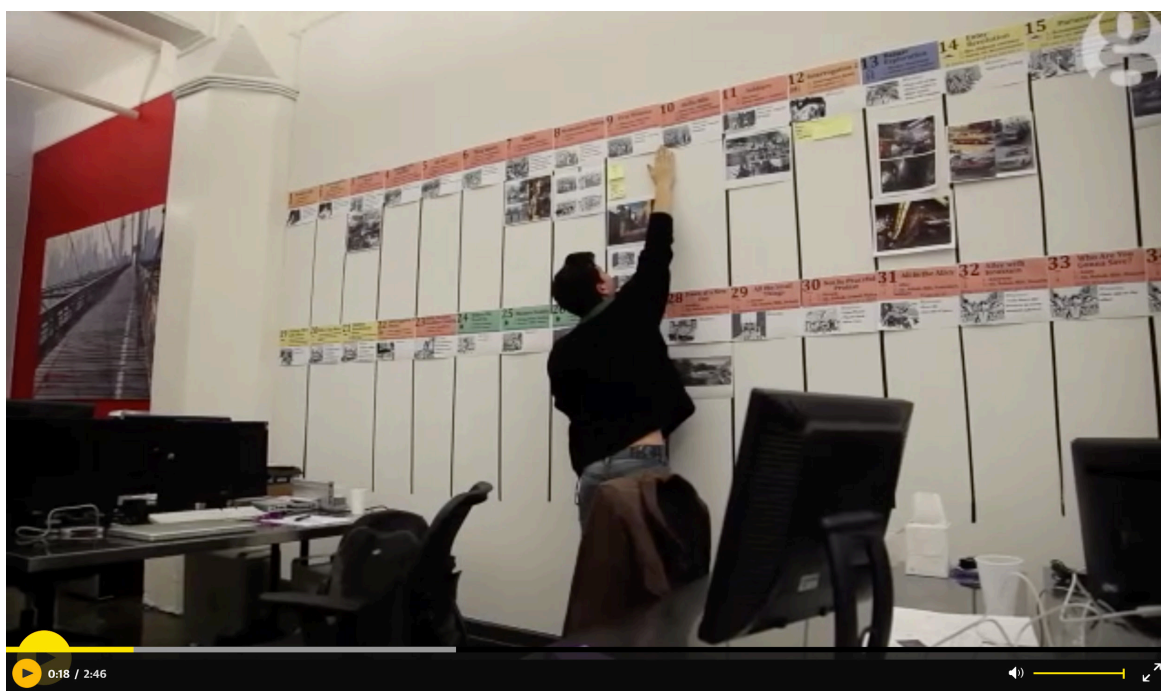
Experience

1979 Revolution presents a single player, choice driven, narrative based interactive game that mixes cinematic scenes with highly interactive elements. Currently available on PC, mobile and console platforms, the experience lasts for about three hours and can be played in chapters or in one go.

The game is based on the choose-your-own-adventure books, that were popular in the 80s and 90s, and later gamebooks, in which stories are presented in multi-sequential layers, providing several narrative branches along various paths, typically through the use of numbered paragraphs or pages. In 1979 Revolution, the story

reveals itself interactively in the form of individual choices, where every choice made influences the story and impacts the following steps and possible endings. The gameplay consists of walking around, talking to people, interacting with objects, and making decisions.

The game follows the story of Reza, a student who returns home in Iran from Germany to find the streets of Tehran full of people protesting. Reza is also a photographer and he gets involved in life threatening situations which affect his friends and family, as well as his own safety in the middle of the political turmoil. By making key decisions, the story develops in



Still of the making of 1979 Revolution, Guardian online

One of the techniques used is the dialogue tree or conversation tree, which is a game-play mechanic used throughout many



1979 REVOLUTION - BLACK FRIDAY

adventure games and role playing video games. When interacting with a character, the player is given a choice of what to say and makes subsequent choices until the conversation ends. This technique allows games designers to reiterate information about a topic, allowing players to replay parts of the conversation that they did not pay close enough attention to the first time.

These conversations are designed as a tree structure where players decide between each branch of the dialogue to pursue. Also players might be prompted to earlier parts of the conversation tree and repeat them if they haven't achieved the selected goal. With an extensive narrative and a large

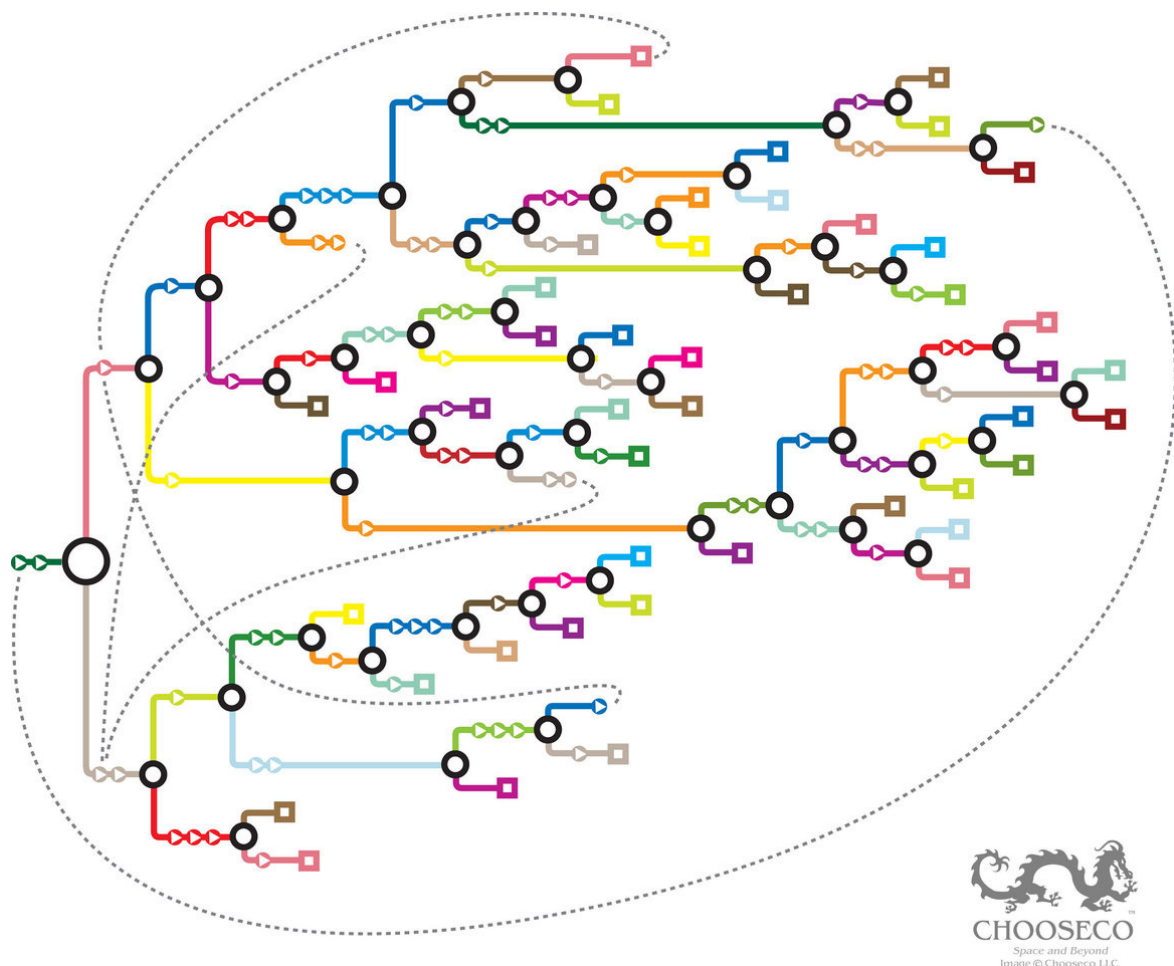
number of scenes, the game includes many different features, including:

► Making Critical Choices

The choices players are forced to make will shape the experience, and the fates of other characters, both in the present and the future.

► Presented as a cinematic experience

Branching cinematic story told through motion captured animation and voice over performances allows the discovery of the world of Tehran in the 1970's, through a striking visual style.



Example Visualisation of a Choose Your Own Adventure narrative: Space and Beyond, Choose Your Own Adventure #3

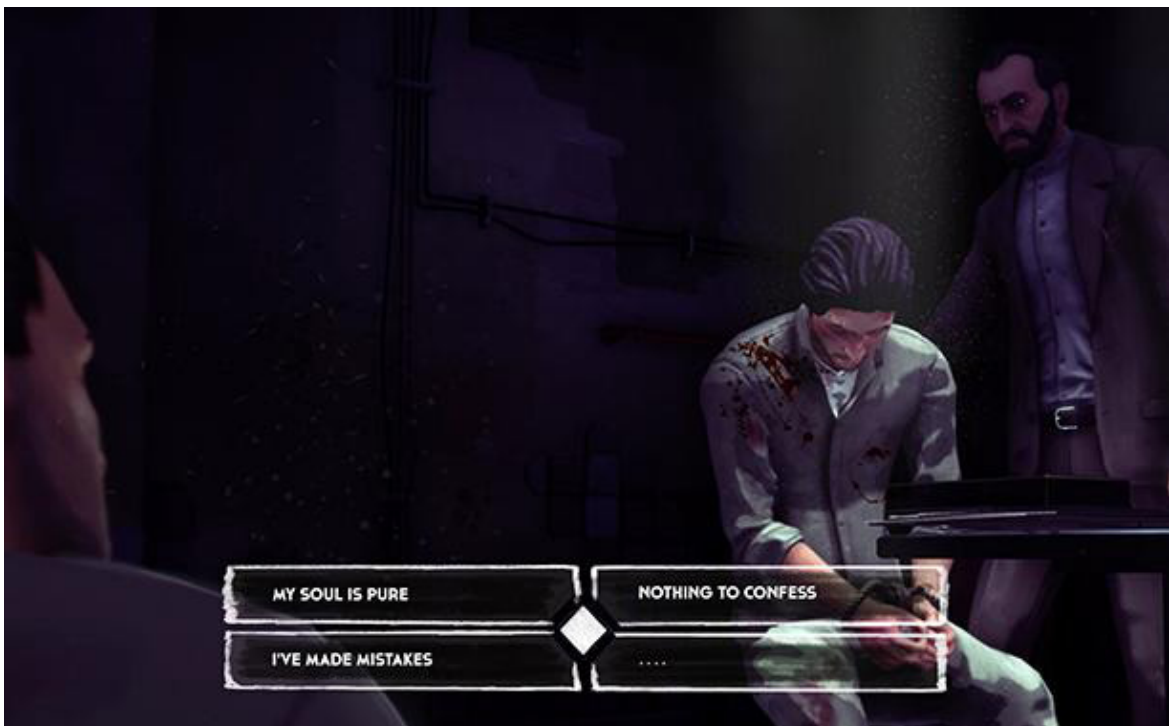


► Explorative content

Using the navigation features players can explore the world of the collapsing city: covert headquarters, rioting protests, bustling city streets and more.

► Photography within the game

Players can take photos in-game and compare them to the original archival photos captured by celebrated photojournalists.



► Collectibles and parallel stories

There are over 80 unique stories that run in parallel with the main story: including primary sources like archival videos, home movies, graffiti, photographs and more.

► Based on historical events

The game is based on first hand testimonies of witnesses and casualties of the revolution, as well as those who were imprisoned in Iran's notorious Evin Prison. It contains in-game dossiers on the real people and events upon which it's based.

► Meticulously designed environments

The game creators have paid great attention to creating the environments and characters to be authentic and historically accurate. By sourcing a number of photos, public and private, and hearing personal testimonials, they pieced together what

they proudly say is a “conscientious depiction of the Tehran of 1979.”³

³ <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1817380887/1979-revolution-black-friday>



#5

Technology

1979 Revolution: Black Friday runs on the Unity games engine. It has been made compatible with most platforms including: Windows, Mac, Android, iOS, Playstation, Nintendo, Xbox. It is available on most games stores for purchase. Prices range from 5 USD for the PC version to 11.99 USD for the console version.

The character's performances were mostly recorded using motion capture technology, with remaining audio elements recorded later in a studio. The motion capture studio—House of Moves, in Los Angeles—used over 70 cameras, synchronised to capture the full-body motion of each actor. This captures were then integrated into the

game characters providing a realistic feel to the game.

Since the game is dense it requires enough space on the devices to install, it varying from 2GB to 5GB.

Following the success of the game, iNK Stories developed *Blindfold*, an interactive VR experience which is set in the same story, within a prison and presents characters from the game. The VR experience is available for Oculus only. The VR experience doesn't use interface menus but allows the user to interact with their own moves (nod, shake your head, or remain silent).

#6

Production & Distribution

1979 Revolution: Black Friday was in development for four years; the first two years consisted of seeking funding, and the game was developed over the following two years. The game was developed and published by iNK Stories created with support by N-Fusion Interactive who are Unity developer specialists.

Navid Khonsari was one of the main creators behind “Grand Theft Auto III”, “Vice City” and other shooter games. But after leaving his career game developers, he started working with his own team at iNK Stories, an independent studio in New York City, to develop *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*.

The iNK Stories team included his partner Vassili Khonsari who is a graduate in visual anthropology as well as a documentary filmmaker. She brought a lot of

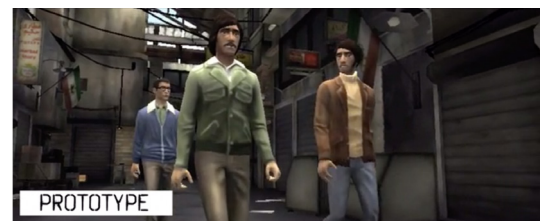
knowledge in that experience, planning and conducting extensive research for the game, using an anthropological approach, where they interviewed a total of 90 people including historical scholars and Iranians who lived in Tehran during the Revolution. They also gathered numerous archival photos and historical speeches. “We had academic, religious and cultural advisers on board. We needed to make sure that we got everything accurate. We did over 40 interviews from a huge spectrum of background, culturally, social class, and just had a huge research team that just went [sic] endless”.⁴

4 <https://www.ibtimes.com/why-1979-revolution-creators-built-game-based-iranian-revolution-2358632>

Funding

1979 Revolution was initially launched in Kickstarter as a prototype with alongside a crowdfunding campaign however the project fell short of its Kickstarter goal of \$395,000 after bringing in \$304,741 from 1,653 backers. It achieved extra \$90,000 via their website. Following the failed campaign, the team partnered with the New Frontier Story Lab at Sundance in 2014 and 2015, the Museum of the Moving Image in

New York, and the Doris Duke Foundation.



Controversy

Since Navid Khonsari began work on the game, called *1979 Revolution*, it was labeled as “Western propaganda” by an Iran government-run newspaper and some members of his team used aliases to protect themselves from the repercussions of creating a video game based on a controversial event that has persistent reverberations today.⁵

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/nov/13/iran-1979-revolution-video-game-kickstarter>

The game is banned in Iran. “Iranians will quickly realize the hostile intentions and objectives of the developer if they see the game,” National Foundation for Computer Games Director Hassan Karimi said in a statement, the Tehran Times reported.⁶

6 <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/300689/Iran-plans-to-block-websites-offering-1979-Revolution>

BLINDFOLD

The second project by iNK Stories is *Blindfold*, a VR experience which branches out from the *1979 Revolution* game story. For this project iNK Stories partnered with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) to provide information and fact check to make sure *Blindfold* was as realistic as possible.



#7

Outcomes and Future Planning

1979 *Revolution: Black Friday* has been very well received by critics. Review aggregator Metacritic ⁷calculated an average score of 80 out of 100 based on 25 reviews. It also calculated a user score of 7.7 based on 69 reviews. Reviewers liked the game's narrative, characters, and historical representations, though some criticism was directed at its quick-time sequences, and visual quality.

1979 *Revolution* has been engaged by UNESCO to help in conflict resolution. In a statement, UNESCO-MGIEP director Anantha Duraiappah told CBC News that when it comes to evoking empathy, "video games have an edge over traditional classroom teaching".

Research was initiated by Unesco to study how digital games can support peace education and conflict resolution. The research includes learnings from 1979 *Revolution* and other games⁸

⁷ <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/1979-revolution-black-friday>

⁸ *Empathy, Perspective and Complicity: How Digital Games can Support Peace Education and Conflict Resolution* by Paul Darvasi, 2016.

Summary of key learnings:

- ▶ Interactive virtual environments can provide safe spaces for contact and collaboration, encourage perspective-taking, produce empathy, help negotiate ethical and moral dilemmas, stimulate intercultural understanding, facilitate the acquisition of historical and cultural knowledge and, occasion reflection on one's own passive complicity when faced with instances of suffering and injustice
- ▶ Much work remains to be done before this emergent, complex, and rapidly evolving medium can be more effectively leveraged for the ends of social good.
- ▶ Design and implementation must proceed cautiously, as digital games are powerful tools whose mismanagement can backfire and achieve unintended consequences such as cultural appropriations, emotional manipulations and "emotioneering". As the field progresses, designers will be challenged to negotiate the fine lines that distinguish the complicated from the complex and representation from misrepresentation.
- ▶ A critical approach must underpin the successful use of digital games as instruments of social justice. Games are subject to the same interrogative process that underpins all media.

Recommendations for Policy

- Integrate programs to instruct in the use of digital games for education, peace education, and conflict resolution in college and university curriculums.
- Train and encourage educators to implement commercial off-the-shelf games (COTS) in addition to games designed specifically with educational goals.
- Provide direction and resources to model how digital games can be modified and repurposed from their intended use to meet specific learning outcomes.
- Develop and disseminate ancillary material and resources to contextualize gameplay to better achieve desired learning objectives.
- Create online forums and/or opportunities for face-to-face discussions to contextualize gameplay with dialogue, collaboration, and reflection.
- Leverage shared virtual spaces and multiplayer game environments to enable intergroup contact and enact virtual peace education (VPE).
- Organize workshops, conferences, and symposiums where scholars, experts, and practitioners can share ideas, models, and practical experiences.
- Ensure that digital games used for the work of education and peace do not include elements of cultural appropriation, trivialize important issues or essentialize race, ethnicity, practices, and beliefs.

Potential Future Research Questions:

- How can digital games be designed and implemented to effect sustainable and positive changes in the attitudes and behaviors of ingroup members involved in prolonged and intractable conflicts?
- What are the affective and cognitive responses to the various perspectives players can take in digital games?
- How can empathy generated through gameplay lead to action and pro-social behavior outside the game?
- How do moral dilemmas negotiated within digital games affect or influence a player's real-world ethical conduct?
- What are best practices and strategies for harnessing digital games for the work of peace and education by practitioners who have little to no experience in this area?

Learnings from the Empathy, Perspective and Complicity: How Digital Games can Support Peace Education and Conflict Resolution paper by Paul Darvasi, 2016.

The Khonsaris coined the term “Vérité Games” to describe 1979 Revolution and their future projects, which could potentially explode into a new gaming genre. This is a form of interactive storytelling that combines advanced video game tech-

nology with elements from documentary film, and a flexible fictionalized narrative.⁹

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/nov/09/1979-revolution-video-game-documentary-launch>

The creation of the *Blindfold* VR experience was an imminent result from the game. Following the story, and set in one of the games scenes, the prison with more research on characters and stories. *Blindfold* was added into the Committee to Protect Journalists [Free the Press campaign](#), which aims to raise awareness around journalists who have been imprisoned.

Navid Khonsari thinks video games are the perfect way to put players in those sort of challenging situations that have no clear, conventionally heroic decision. And he aims to show that games can make history come alive, too.¹⁰

Khonsari on games: “This medium is too powerful for us to just squander it in those ways,” he explains. “We should be expanding ... we should be exploring it, you know? This should be an educational tool. This should be a way for us to create cognitive empathy by being in someone else’s shoes.” Khonsari also says he thinks his games can connect people with history in a new way.¹¹

A review from a user reinforces the possibilities of games as learning tools for the

present and the future:

“There are lots that people could learn and video game is just the right platform for that. You are experiencing it, feeling it, getting awed and shocked by it — not just being told. Endless possibilities and massive immersion.”¹²

12 User comment from Alexandre Canuto, 2016 <https://medium.com/@alexandre-canuto/i-for-one-love-the-idea-of-truth-based-or-at-least-truth-inspired-games-v%C3%A9rit%C3%A9-games-a03898f6cf6cd>

10 https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/269815/How_1979_Revolution_Black_Friday_drops_players_into_a_real_crisis.php

11 <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/iran-has-tried-to-kill-this-video-game-ba1b22710236>

#8

Internal Evaluation and Learnings

Process

The design was carefully thought through, and included an intense research period to collect data both from historical sources as well as from witnesses and experts. This research is visible in the richness of the materials presented in the game, which include real footage, audio and photos.

The choice of storytelling, through decision making situations is very effective in keep-

ing the user engaged whilst providing an individually customised experience.

The game has been widely adapted to most platforms and technologies available since its inception in 2016 so it can be accessed by as many people as possible. This is possible thanks to the work iNK Stories are doing to keep the game up to date.

Product and features

The game varied features and mechanics including cinematic scenes, interactive storytelling, extras and mini games make it a very rich game to play. The use of mini games within the main narrative is also very effective at engaging during the course of the main narrative and adds an element of gaming.

There are also violent and psychologically intense scenes in the prison, which can become too harsh at times, making the story

very realistic and emotional.

The dialogue system is dense yet it provides a way to explore the characters in depth.

The choice of building a game using a games engine such as Unity 3D allows the creators to make choices later of continuing the story, such as with the VR experience Blindfold which is a branch story of the game.

Content

The focus on storytelling makes the game very engaging. The dense plot is the core, with all its complex branches, the relationships with the other characters and the detail of the context history make the game truly rich and realistic.

This level of historical detail and information make the game apt for learning, however so much detail could also affect negatively making it difficult to retain.

Scalability

The initial fundraising through a crowdfunding platform was ambitious, however it reached a high level of funding 305K. This proves to be an interesting fundraising method to explore, however at the same time understanding the potential challenges of not reaching the goal.

Thanks to private donations the target was reached, and the game was able to enter into production.

Key Learnings of Relevance for SBDRR

Educational games can tend to be less praised than entertainment games, however 1979 Revolution challenges any statement by providing a unique experience blending educational games and historical thriller, connecting with players all the way until the end. It is a unique example for the humanitarian sector and SBDRR work to take learnings from, including the focus on storytelling, strategies to engage users and attention to detail.

Top takeaways:

- ▶ Digital interactive games can provide a balanced space between gameplay and learning which could be very useful for teaching disaster preparedness - particularly for awareness raising and knowledge.
- ▶ Driving the game through storytelling provides high levels of engagement and empathy - particularly when the user becomes a character in the game that creates a strong emotional connection.
- ▶ Using game mechanics such as conversation trees can be very useful to instill knowledge whilst maintaining high engagement.
- ▶ The initial research including interviews and contextual analysis was key to the development of a realistic story
- ▶ The use of choose-your-own-adventure techniques along with branched narratives offer users an engaging and unique experience and a way to learn from their decisions.
- ▶ Well thought and well executed scenes

offer a more credible experience.

- ▶ Creating a solid and well developed game allows for the development of second phases where stories branch out of the main story, in other formats such as VR. This is particularly important when working with technologies that are evolving rapidly over a short period of time, to provide options to remain relevant.
- ▶ Video games have a wide reach and distribution, allowing to reach a large number of users.
- ▶ It takes a lot of funding to produce this level of quality experience - this may not be accessible to the humanitarian sector.



Contact information

Global Disaster Preparedness Center

<https://www.preparecenter.org/>

email: gdpc@redcross.org

431 18th St NW

Washington, DC 20006

USA



CREATIVE COMMONS
Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0