



# Homeless: it's no game

## Measuring the Effectiveness of Social Advocacy Videogames

### Abstract

There is little concrete evidence for the effectiveness of social advocacy videogames. **Homeless: it's no game** is being developed to add to the data available. In the game, the player assumes the role of a homeless woman who is trying to survive in a city. Two versions of the game will be developed – one in which the homeless person is a sympathetic victim of circumstance, the other in which she engages in self-destructive and anti-social behaviour. Volunteers will be randomly assigned to play one of the versions of the game and then measured on their attitudes towards the homeless. The research will test the hypothesis that playing the role of a sympathetic homeless character leads to a more positive attitude towards homeless people than playing the role of a non-sympathetic character or not playing the game at all.

### The rise of persuasive games

Can games deliberately influence attitudes and behaviour? Judging by the increased prevalence of persuasive games (advergaming, edugames, health games, social and political advocacy games, etc.) many people believe that games can be persuasive.

#### Examples of Persuasive Games

- **Electoral Politics:** Howard Dean for Iowa, The Anti-Bush Video Game
- **World Affairs:** Darfur is Dying, PeaceMaker, Food Force
- **Advergaming:** Spriteball, Absolut Search
- **Anti-corporatism:** The McDonald's Video Game, Disaffected
- **Social Activism:** Revenge of the PETA Tomatoes, Steer Madness
- **Health and Wellness:** Re-Mission, GlucoBoy



Darfur is Dying



Steer Madness



Revenge of the PETA Tomatoes

### How persuasive are these games?

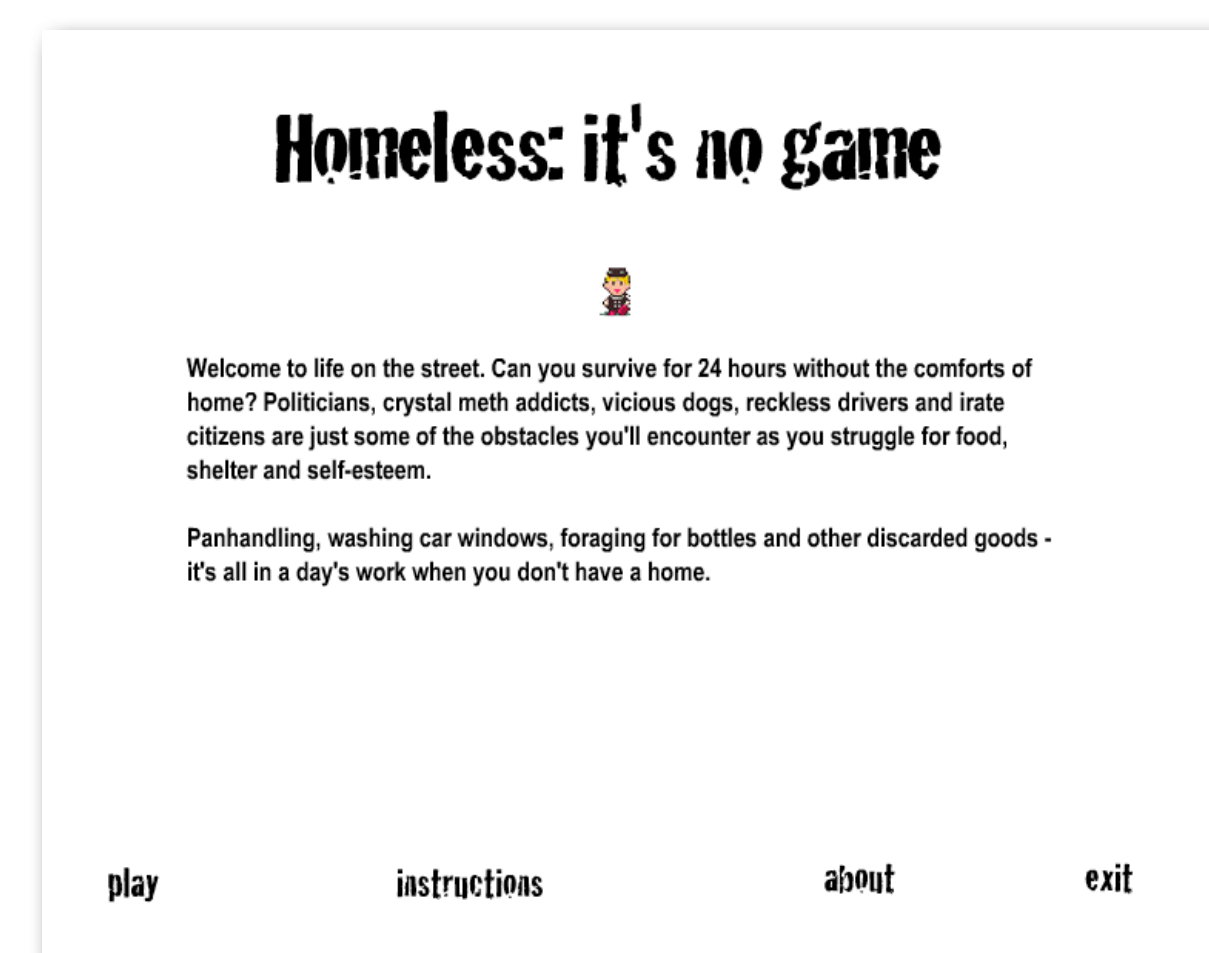
- As of June 2006, America's Army players had logged more than 160 million hours of game time and had clicked through to the recruitment website GoArmy.com 1.35 million times
- the Food Force website boasts more than 4 million downloads

But do these numbers translate into behavioural or attitudinal changes? How many of the America's Army players who clicked through to GoArmy.com took the next step towards enlisting? And do the schoolchildren who download Food Force become advocates for famine relief and structural change in food distribution systems?

Even when attitudes or behaviours change, how much of this change is due to playing the game and how much because of other factors? Do players of political games participate in a political campaign because of the game, or would they do so regardless? Are children who play Food Force motivated to learn about world hunger because of the game or because the game was part of a broader educational package that included other study elements?

### A need for data

Most studies of the influence of videogames have focused on violent games and whether they lead to increased aggression. On the other hand, there has been little empirical study of the effectiveness of persuasive games. When it comes to social advocacy games – games that try to persuade their players to change their opinions regarding or to get involved with a social issue – there is even less evidence. There is a need for more research in this area if these games are to be considered as serious agents of persuasion.



Homeless: it's no game splash screen

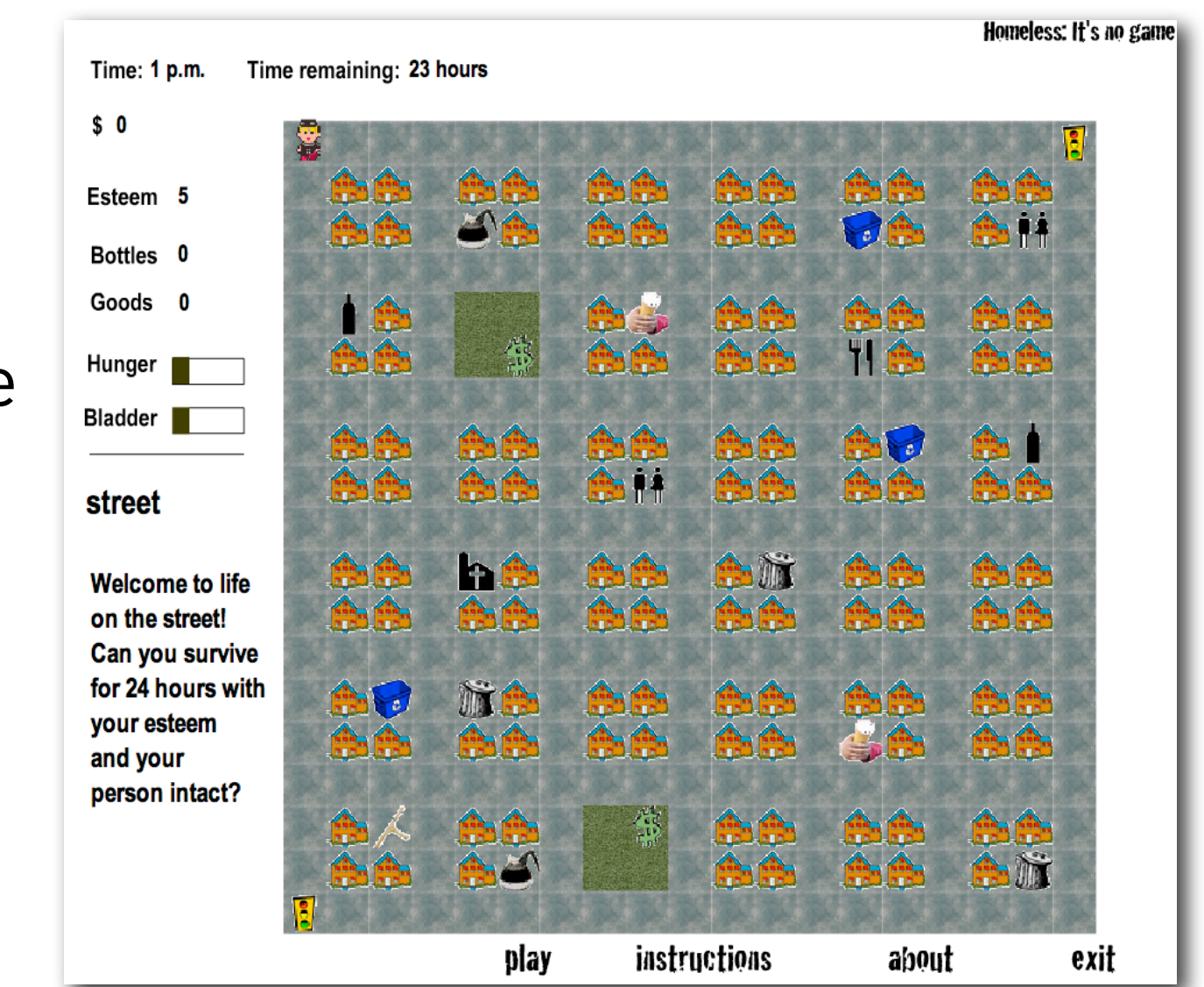
### Homeless: it's no game

**Homeless: it's no game** is intended to add to the body of data on the effectiveness and measurability of persuasive games. The player assumes the role of a homeless woman who forages for bottles and

goods to sell, begs for change, and otherwise tries to survive on the streets of a typical North American city.

Two versions of the game will be developed – one in which the homeless person is a sympathetic victim, the other in which she engages in self-destructive (alcohol and drug abuse) and anti-social (theft, violence) behaviour. Volunteers will be assigned to play one of the two versions of the game or to be part of a control group that does not play the game. All volunteers will be measured on their attitudes towards the homeless, using a five-item scale consisting of the following statements:

1. Society is responsible for people being homeless
2. Many homeless people have themselves to blame
3. Society should not have to support or house homeless people
4. Society is turning away and letting down the homeless
5. A nation should be ashamed of its homeless problem



Homeless: it's no game board

#### Hypothesis

Playing the role of a sympathetic homeless character will result in a higher homeless sympathy score than playing the role of a non-sympathetic character or not playing the game at all, in other words, that people's sympathies can be swayed, at least temporarily, by a video game.

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