
Learning about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict through a Simulation: The Case of PeaceMaker

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Abstract

In this paper we describe (a) our reasons for wanting to participate in Human-Computer Interaction for Peace, (b) what we can contribute to the workshop, and (c) what we want to get out of the workshop.

Keywords

Conflict resolution, technology, simulations, cross-cultural study, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, learning.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Experimentation. Human factors. Measurement.

Introduction

We examined the effectiveness and usefulness of technology as a pedagogical tool in teaching conflict resolution [3]. There is very little research on this question and none of the assessments involved a cross-cultural experimental study [e.g., 5]. We conducted a cross cultural experiment in four different national groups using PeaceMaker [1], a computer game

simulating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We were specifically interested in the following questions: Does the game affect participants' acquisition of knowledge about the conflict? Does the game contribute to attitude change regarding the conflict? Are there any differences in terms of knowledge acquisition and attitude change between participants that are direct parties to the conflict (in this study Jewish Israelis and Palestinians) and those that are third parties (Americans and Turks)?

In PeaceMaker [1] a player can assume the role of the Israeli Prime Minister or the role of the Palestinian President and engage in a series of decisions with the aim of satisfying constituents on both sides of the conflict. The game can be played in English, Hebrew or Arabic on calm, tense or violent conflict levels, differing in the frequency of events that appear on the screen and are beyond the player's control. In order to deal with these events a player can select actions pertaining to three main categories: security, political and construction, each branching into a variety of sub-categories (e.g., checkpoints). In order to resolve the conflict in the game, scores for both Israeli and Palestinian sides must reach 100 points each. If either score drops below -50 the player loses the game.

167 undergraduate students of political science participated in the study, including 38 Turkish students from Bilkent University, 50 Jewish Israeli students from Tel Aviv University, 39 American students from the School for Overseas Students at Tel Aviv University and 40 Palestinian students from Bethlehem University.

After being introduced to PeaceMaker, the participants filled in a short questionnaire focusing on knowledge

questions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and attitudes toward the conflict. The students were then asked to play the role of the Israeli Prime Minister and the role of the Palestinian President in random order. After playing the game twice, participants filled in a second short questionnaire, almost identical in content to the first questionnaire with the exception of a few additional questions regarding participants' experience with the game.

Results suggested that all participants became more knowledgeable about the conflict after playing the game. In addition, Turkish and American students became more impartial toward the Gaza operation after playing the game, while Jewish Israeli and Palestinian students did not change their attitude toward the Gaza operation after playing the game. Jewish Israeli students thought that Israelis are somewhat right regarding the Gaza operation, while Palestinian students thought that Palestinians are somewhat right regarding the Gaza operation. Finally, the four groups did not change their attitudes concerning key issues in the conflict (i.e., Jerusalem, water, security, refugees, settlements, borders) after playing the game.

Why do we want to participate?

We explore the potential of game platforms like PeaceMaker to serve as a learning space about the situation for young people in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Learning refers to knowledge acquisition about the conflict and attitude change toward the situation. For this purpose we use obtrusive measures (e.g., questionnaires) and unobtrusive measures (e.g., a software patch recording each action a player takes in PeaceMaker). Unobtrusive measures reduce the biases that result from the intrusion of the researcher or

measurement instrument which can lead the respondents to alter their behavior in order to look good in the eyes of the researcher [6]. Hence, combining obtrusive and unobtrusive measures enables a more accurate measurement of participants' game behavior and participants' attitudes toward the conflict because they are unaware that their actions are recorded.

What we can contribute to the workshop

The cross-cultural experiment presented in the introduction examined the potential of PeaceMaker [1] to serve as a learning tool about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for Jewish Israelis, Americans, Turks and Palestinians, focusing on knowledge acquisition and attitude change toward the conflict [3]. The study used obtrusive and unobtrusive measures as described above. We are currently analyzing the strategies used by the participants attempting to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the game, focusing on the diversity of actions undertaken in the game.

In addition, we have comparative knowledge on the potential of different technological platforms to serve as a learning space about the situation for young people in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [2, 4].

What we want to get out of the workshop

By participating in the workshop we hope to achieve a few goals. First, we wish to expose ourselves to different ideas in the field of Human-Computer Interaction, with a concentration on technologies for conflict resolution. Second, we hope to meet other researchers dealing with different conflict regions and learn from their experience regarding our case study. This can give us the opportunity to collaborate with

other researchers in the future. Third, we wish to understand more about how youngsters from different conflict regions learn about the situation using technology. This can help us to understand more about our case study - by comparison to other cases. Fourth, we hope to write a book or edit a journal volume based on the work of the participants in the workshop. Finally, we wish to collaborate with other researchers from academia and from industry in developing new tools for the evaluation of conflict resolution activities with unobtrusive measures.

References

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