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# World Peace Through Video Games? Research To Study Gamers' Approaches to Middle East Conflict Resolution

■ Jonathan Potts

Maybe a video game can save the world.

Sound far-fetched? Perhaps. But Cleotilde Gonzalez thinks that video games have a lot to teach us about problem-solving and how players' biases influence what they do when confronted with one of the most intractable problems of all.

Gonzalez, director of the university's Dynamic Decision Making Laboratory, is using the PeaceMaker video game — which calls on players to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — to study how a person's background and knowledge of the conflict influences how they negotiate a solution. Gonzalez is conducting her research at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon in Qatar and through the Peres Center for Peace in Israel, where as many as 10,000 Israeli and Palestinian youth will participate in the study.

Impact Games, the Carnegie Mellon spin-off that produces PeaceMaker, has helped Gonzalez modify the game so that it can collect data — essentially, recording every decision that players

make in attempting to win the game.

“We are building a story of the strategies that students take in the game,” said Gonzalez, an associate research professor in the Department of Social and Decision Sciences.

In PeaceMaker, each player assumes the role of the Israeli or Palestinian leader and is presented with a scenario in which multiple and inter-related choices are made in a constantly changing environment. Gonzalez said that while many people have studied sequential decision making, research has rarely focused on this kind of realistic, dynamic decision making.

“To this point I have mostly studied individual decision makers that play with ‘nature’ rather than with another smart partner. In PeaceMaker, the actions depend on the reactions of the other side, and a two-state solution is the only way to win this game,” Gonzalez said.

“The incentives to win the game are not purely dependent on your own well-being but on the well-being of your partner, too. The incentives of the players in this game may interact in complex ways

and further depend on the knowledge and beliefs that you bring to the game,” she said.

With funding from the Lounsberry Foundation, Gonzalez is working with Kiron Skinner, director of the International Relations Program, and Laurie Eisenberg, associate teaching professor of history, who teaches a course titled “The Arab-Israeli Condition: War and Peace.” Students in the class play the game at the beginning of the semester and again at the end of the course. Eisenberg and Gonzalez have developed questions to gauge the students' familiarity with the conflict.

Gonzalez will track how students' views change over the course of the semester and how this influences their game play. She wants to know, among other things, whether understanding both sides of the story helps players resolve the conflict successfully.

“We see this project as a first step in advancing our research in applying decision science and simulation techniques to real-life social and political dilemmas. Our findings stand to improve training services in crisis management and



THIS SCREEN CAPTURE WAS TAKEN FROM THE PEACEMAKER VIDEO GAME, WHICH WILL BE USED TO STUDY PLAYERS APPROACHES TO RESOLVING THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT.

conflict resolution,” Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez will also conduct a similar study with students at Carnegie Mellon's campus at Education City in Doha, Qatar, and she also hopes to include students at the other American campuses at Education City. At the Peres Center in Israel, a study will be run through the center's IT Peace Projects Department. Israeli and Palestinian youth will participate in a series of workshops in which each child will play PeaceMaker as both the Israeli prime minister and the Palestinian leader.