

More and more video games have a social agenda

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MIAMI — A Japanese computer science student fails to take a full load of university classes and loses his student visa. A 10th-grade Indian girl is detained because of a high school essay she wrote on the Department of Homeland Security.

These are two of the characters in ICED! — a new video game that invites players to step into the shoes of foreigners who run afoul of the U.S. immigration system. It is part of a burgeoning genre of video games that examine major social and policy issues such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the situation in Darfur and the Electoral College.

"The game allows you to get into the body of a person, so you can experience what they are going through. There are very few opportunities to get that perspective," said Mallika Dutt, head of the nonprofit Breakthrough, which produced the game and uses new media to highlight social issues around the world.

ICED! — a play on the acronym for the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement office — is scheduled to be available for free download next month.

ICED! seeks to show how immigration laws passed in 1996 expanded the number of crimes that can trigger deportation and limited immigrants' rights to appeal.

Players try to avoid deportation by keeping a low profile and performing community service. Shoplifting or jumping a subway turnstile loses points. Lose too many, and your character ends up in federal detention.

"You can get a lot out of a game, more than from film and other media in some ways, because you are actively engaged rather than just a passive consumer," said Suzanne Seggerman, head of the nonprofit group Games for Change.

Barbara Gonzalez, a spokeswoman for ICE, declined to comment on the game.

In the first level, players keep a low profile in a city vaguely resembling New York.

In the second level, they must navigate an immigration detention center.

Programmer Heidi Boisvert estimates the game can take 10 to 30 minutes to play. She and Natalia Rodriguez came up with the idea in graduate school and approached Breakthrough to develop it.

Boisvert said they didn't talk to immigration authorities, but all of the characters they chose were based on real situations.

Louis DeSipio, a University of California, Irvine, political science professor and immigration expert, believes the game can help players understand the diversity of American society.

"It's easy to assume that everyone is like you," DeSipio said. "A game like this can show that."