

## The Next President Needs to Run America Like It's a Video Game

*By Peter Chun*

I played too many video games during high school.

I liked the ones where you build and defend an empire over the centuries. What fascinated me was how even small changes could dramatically increase my empire's productivity, sometimes in surprising ways. Should I increase scientific research, or cultural influence? Should I make a priority of social cohesion, economic growth, military hardware, or teacher training?

Different games had different internal rules, and so different reward systems. A universal condition for victory, however, was that my society be "well-managed" according to the rules of that particular game.

Successful administration could deliver me the world. Maladministration meant I would be another empire's breakfast.



If they can get beyond insults and sloganeering, Democrats and Republicans will be arguing in the 2020 presidential campaign about what each side thinks are the "internal rules" governing real-world America. What aspects of our society are most valuable? How can we tweak societal incentives to encourage greater productivity? How do we extract more value from each citizen?

Some readers might object: "You can't talk about people like they're digital cogs in a machine. That's immoral!"

I respectfully disagree. While playing computer games, I was impelled to care about the citizens of my virtual empire to an extent that some current political leaders can't muster toward their real-world compatriots. If my citizens were hungry, or tired, or oppressed, they were of less use to me than if they were fit and focused. Each citizen's output was a number, and the sum of those numbers was my imperial power.

That's true in the real world too, though many politicians don't seem to fathom it.



So how might a future President, understanding the video game lesson that the welfare of her/his citizens is the determinant of national power, run America?



They would certainly make national systems as much of a daily priority as national defense, and hire a National Infrastructure Advisor equivalent in rank to their National Security Advisor. The “NIA” would coordinate interagency efforts to supercharge economic growth by strengthening our infrastructure – physical, cyber, scientific, free market, and regulatory/legal. The NIA would oversee government-sponsored science investments, targeting public policy priorities (cybersecurity, for example, or clean energy) as well as areas poorly addressed by the private sector because they are not connected to near-term market opportunities.

Such a President would accept the responsibility to explain to Americans what our national logistical systems are (e.g., high tech, transportation, energy, education, elections and governance, public safety, water/sanitation/food, refuse/recycling, medical, etc.), and why they must be the most advanced in the world for us to “win” the game.

To stay focused, he or she could install a wall-sized touch screen in the West Wing with an expandable digital map showing every national logistical project, and its progress. Projects overdue or over budget or fouled in red tape would flash red, and the President would know whose butt to kick.



Our hypothetical President would pursue maximum output from every citizen, setting as a goal that no American be underemployed or undereducated (particularly since future jobs will demand more academic preparation and job training than the ones going away). Education, still mired in unsatisfactory 20<sup>th</sup> century customs and beliefs, needs big, new ideas for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Lower-performing communities or individuals would be targeted for special attention, not ignored and forgotten. Over the last several years, we’ve heard a lot about America’s “Lost Boys” – adolescents and young adults, mostly of European ethnicity, who fail to thrive academically, professionally or socially, and turn to nihilism and hate and violence. A wise President would understand that, while not everyone can be saved from their demons, the “Lost Boys” are a tragic symptom of a wider societal failure.

21CAR is separately working on a proposal for national service, which is one potential means of rescue. Whatever the specific mechanism, America must offer meaning to its young people, a new nationalism of noble purpose to replace atavistic stumbling toward ancient hatreds.



Related to that, our wise President would reform democracy and government not just because our values demand it but because a shaken faith in our political system is an economic cost. In our hypothetical video game America, an emperor could focus down on each citizen's metrics and see how civic satisfaction (patriotism, trust in governing elites, respect for rule of law, and *E Pluribus Unum* solidarity) is directly related to morale and thus to productivity.

21CAR is separately working on a proposal for expanded civics education. Anecdotal evidence would suggest Americans need more of it.



A wise President would seek to liberate the citizenry from meaningless toil or distractions, like overcomplicated health plans or tax codes that force non-experts to make decisions amidst complexity. She or he would combat spam email and telemarketing fraud more energetically and understand traffic as a grave threat to productivity. (Road congestion steals time that could have been spent on productive work and degrades productivity in the workplace due to sleep deprivation, anger, and inhalation of engine exhaust.)

He or she would stamp out employment discrimination, which deletes a portion of productivity from the person who should have got the job as well as from the person who did.



A President who drew wisdom from video games would devote sustained energy to fighting crime, which robs society of both the criminal's potential productivity and some portion of victims' potential productivity. It imposes direct costs on society for policing, incarceration, court costs, insurance, repair/rehabilitation, et al. It also imposes indirect costs, including psychosocial damage to victims, blighting neighborhoods, and fracturing social cohesion.

It is shocking that American crime rates are dramatically higher than in other countries at a similar socio-economic level. That disparity may be especially true for white-collar crime (including tax fraud), given decades of poor enforcement. Americans seem to accept crime as if there is some immutable American proclivity to break the law, when its ubiquity is rather a symptom of governance failure. A wise President would not make that mistake.



Finally, a civically healthy citizenry is partly the manifestation of a physically and mentally healthy citizenry. As any video-game emperor knows, a sick population is a danger to itself and to its government. And as a wise real-world President would understand, there is a connection in 21<sup>st</sup> century America between economic and social marginalization and ill health.

There are supply-side solutions (such as an expansive national health corps, providing medical training for doctors and nurses in exchange for service in communities at-risk). And education can goose the demand-side for needed health services. But the core strategy must be a national safety-net health care program, as exists in every other developed country. 21CAR is a big tent

ideologically, and we argue about how such a program could be most efficiently managed. But not one of us disagrees as to its necessity.

But merely responding to health threats is inefficient. We must also do more to prevent them. Our wise President would ensure there are consequences for those who endanger national health, whether they be purveyors of dangerous food and drugs; parents who don't have their children inoculated against contagious diseases; or companies that pollute our air, water, or land.



I would submit that playing too many video games ended up teaching me important lessons about public policy.

The leader of a computer-game American Empire could (with sufficient computer power) focus down on each individual citizen and assess their metrics of productivity: their health and energy, their education level, job training, motivation, task-focus, whether they were discriminated against or empowered, bureaucratic impediments, their family financial health, meaningful social ties, and overall life satisfaction.

If running real-world America were like a video game, a wise President could see the direct relationship between increases in societal welfare and increases in national power. Such a President, who treated citizens like digitalized "cogs in a machine" and selfishly followed a "winning" strategy, would have the incentive to treat our fellow citizens more humanely than some Presidents do in this "real" world.