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Food Systems Experiment Demonstrates Citizen Commitment to Increasing Community Food Access and Farmer Livelihoods

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Authors	Hricko, Carolyn;Merrill, Scott C;Mitchell, Rebecca C;Morgan, Caitlin;Trubek, Amy B
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Food Systems Experiment Demonstrates Citizen Commitment to Increasing Community Food Access and Farmer Livelihoods

From Play to Policy

[Race Against Rot](#) is a research project designed to apply policy-based strategies to problems in the food system.

It is not currently possible for small farmers to easily sell their food to low-income communities without compromising their own livelihoods. Meanwhile, Americans with lower incomes are exhorted to eat whole, fresh foods that they cannot afford. Actionable policy is required to create nourishing connections from farmer to consumer.

Informed by stakeholder interviews, the Race Against Rot virtual game was developed to test potential policies. Players act as farmers, tasked with deciding where to sell their product. Throughout gameplay, players are introduced to potential policies to support small local farming — invest in those who are already invested in the community by: subsidizing farmers market fees and/or wholesale distribution fees; providing universal basic income to farmers; and supporting local/regional food hubs. Over 1,000 people from across the United States played the Race Against Rot serious game.

What is a Serious Game?

Serious games can be used to simulate and test real-world solutions to complex social challenges. They allow researchers to observe player decision-making and behavior as they respond in response to different contexts and scenarios. As a research methodology, serious games can be used to *reveal* human behavior rather than *report* it.

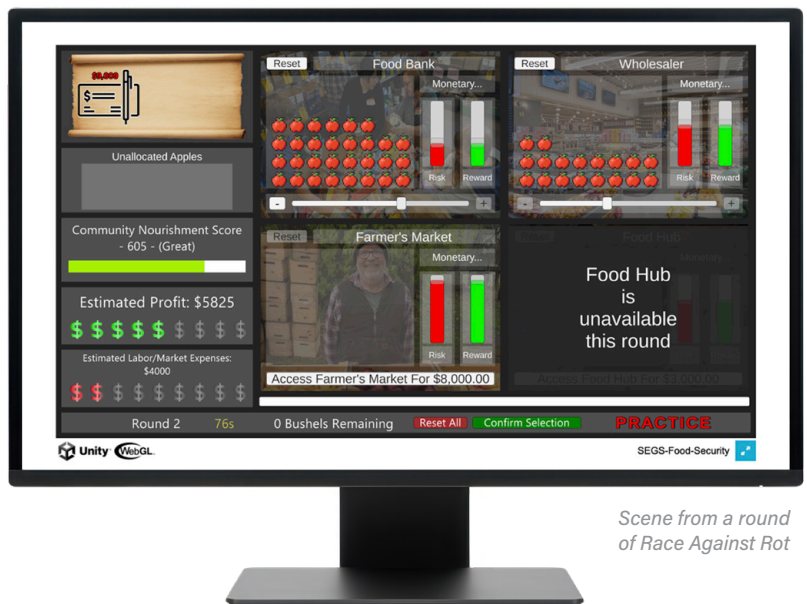
Key Results

As a research methodology, serious games can be used to *reveal* human behavior rather than *report* it.

Players strongly responded to the concept of “community nourishment,” revealing an underlying social value not captured or supported by market mechanisms.

Policy is needed to allow people to act upon this value.

“A cash subsidy[...] would allow the farmers to take a little bit more risk.”
— Boston focus group participant



Scene from a round of Race Against Rot

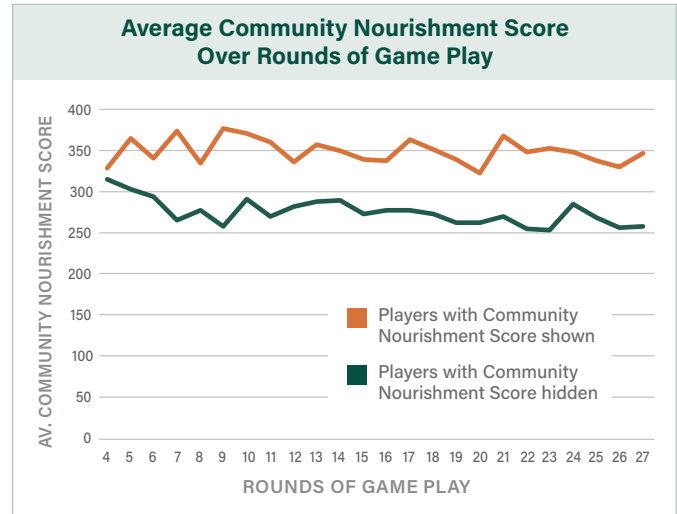
What is Community Nourishment?

In the game, the community nourishment score represents the availability of affordable, local produce to all members of the community, regardless of socioeconomic status. Playing Race Against Rot and being asked — explicitly — to participate in local food system decision-making revealed an underlying social value: players interact positively with community nourishment. They play to increase the community nourishment; through game play it emerges as a priority.

People Play for Social Values, Not Only Profit

Players tried to maximize community nourishment, even when it came at the expense of their own earnings. Half of players saw a visual gauge representing community nourishment played towards a higher community nourishment score across every policy, and those players left an average of \$613.20 in gameplay profits on the table.

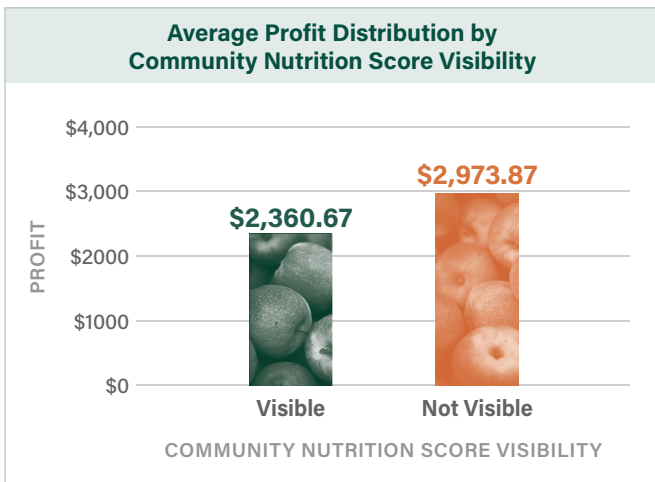
“This is where farmers are being told they need to scale to get to efficiencies of scale, and that’s not necessarily good for anybody or the planet.”
 — Vermont focus group participant



If policies make these community values explicit and also financially supported, farmers will be more able to feed their neighbors. For local food sourcing and access, farmers do not need more market signals — they need clear avenues and support for distribution, including their own communities.

After playing the game, people were more likely to say the government should subsidize small farmers. Playing serious games may reveal and encourage constituents’ attitudes to farming policies in a way that polling has not captured. Race Against Rot proves an encouraging consensus: Americans care deeply about food access and readily support government policy that supports equitable food systems, including government subsidies for small farmers.

“Something’s gotta give. And if I want these [benefits] all for myself, other people suffer. If I want these [benefits] all for other people, I suffer.”
 — Baltimore focus group participant



If players saw their community nourishment score, they sent more apples to the food bank, scoring an average of 25% higher in community nourishment than those who never saw their score. These results show that people respond strongly to social values when they are made obvious — even if it’s not profitable.

Acknowledgements

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Authors

Carolyn Hricko, Scott Merrill, Rebecca C. Mitchell, Caitlin Morgan and Amy B. Trubek

To play the game, visit:

<https://segs.w3.uvm.edu/demos/RaceAgainstRot>