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How to "win" at development

We just sent out our latest IPA [newsletter](#) (sign up to receive the next one [here](#)), which focuses on [agriculture](#) in the developing world. While working on some of the newsletter content, I was reminded of an online game that a friend of mine directed me to several years ago, called [Third World Farmer](#). The game, set in an unnamed African country, is something of a SimCity meets Civilization, with a dash of Oregon Trail thrown in. Each "play" consists of one growing season, before which you must make decisions on how to use your family's scarce resources. Will you plant hardy crops like wheat and corn, or spring for the [risky, but potentially more profitable](#) crops? Should the wife be head of household, or the husband? Will you use any of your scarce funds to [pay for the children's schooling](#), even though it means they will have less time to work on the farm?

Playing the game this time around, I was reminded of why it is so frustrating. Each season, it seems that the region has been beset by a new natural or manmade disaster (sickness in the family, collapse of the central bank, guerilla conflict, drought, the list goes on...) Then often, just as your family seems to be on the brink of disaster, you are offered an escape. You may be asked to plant some opium in your fields, or maybe you will be offered cash in exchange for storing toxic waste on your farm, or for building a paramilitary training camp there. At a certain point, these risky options seem like the only way to survive.

Some might find the idea of turning the struggles of rural Africans into a computer game at least strange, if not offensive. That was certainly not the intent of the [game's creators](#), who write: *"We find this kind of experience efficient at making the issues relevant to people, because players tend to invest their hopes in a game character whose fate depends on him. We aim at making the player 'experience' the injustices, rather than being told about them, so as to stimulate a deeper and more personal reflection on the topics."*

The game is not easy, and it didn't take very many rounds before I found myself frustrated and muttering, "That's not fair! This game is impossible to win!" (And it didn't take very long after that to realize that this is, of course, exactly the point.)

For the record, I can report that it *is* possible to "win" the game. You just have to scrape together enough money to buy communications technology, political representation and crop insurance, and build a school, a clinic, and infrastructure. Easy, right?

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