BOOK REVIEW

Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames

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Ian Bogost
Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames
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As this is the inaugural issue of the International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations it is appropriate to start with a work that attempts to provide a theoretical framework for how and why videogames can move and influence people’s lives. The question of how well Bogost achieves this goal depends upon the audience. While Bogost’s thesis is ripe for a mainstream discussion, the emphasis on traditional theory and the creation of a theoretical framework limit the book’s accessibility. Bogost’s thesis that videogames use processes to effectively communicate ideas and persuade those exposed to them (procedural rhetoric) is a critical explanation of how and why videogames communicate ideas in a variety of settings. While the focus on theory may put off those who watched Bogost’s 2007 appearance on Comedy Central’s Colbert Report, his work is significant to academics in various fields. The text itself also has limited use for game designers due to its’ focus on theory. For designers, Bogost provides little in terms of “how to” but provides a various examples to support why games can be effective tools. Bogost’s text is best suited for academics and researchers seeking explanations of how videogames change players’ ideas and thoughts through the experience of playing. Due to Bogost’s communication background, Persuasive Games is more valuable to those outside of the game studies fields. The theory framework and practical examples Bogost provides creates a strong explanation and support for the power of games that academics and researchers in traditional disciplines can understand and apply.

Bogost’s is an Associate Professor in the School of Literature, Communication, and Culture at Georgia Institute of Technology, and his communication scholarship is evident in this work. He begins the text with a discussion using his discipline to set up the theories around rhetorical communication. This foundation in communication theory establishes his work as a scholarly discussion. Bogost uses his communication framework to launch a discussion about how videogames can not only teach and influence, but also to create a rhetorical framework (procedural literacy) to discuss game analysis from. Bogost’s focus throughout his survey is the creation, application, and importance of how games influence players by putting them...
into a process and experiencing the values and choices of the results of that process creating procedural literacy.

The diversity of fields discussed creates a well-rounded advocacy for gaming as a worthwhile field of scholarship with relevance and application. Those already versed in videogame scholarship and involved in the creation of serious and educational games will not find a lot new here. But they will find a strong and well-reasoned theoretical framework on videogames as a persuasive form of communication that is accessible and relevant to faculty, departments, and academics not versed in videogames.

Bogost’s creation of his theoretical framework is not without limits. While most of Bogost’s examples are clear and well reasoned, some suffer from being too obscure to reasonable apply in practice. Some of the examples used in the book are very overt, while others are more complex and challenging to directly apply. Nintendo’s Animal Crossing videogame and the online flash game McDonald’s Video Game is critiqued and the messages and materialism are discussed. The satire and subversiveness in the McDonald’s Video Game is blatant as the player slaughters cattle for burgers amidst disease and feces. But in Animal Crossing, which is targeted to a younger audience, is the satire of materialism and how some game characters work against it apparent to the players? Without further discussion and guidance do players see or understand the social and cultural criticisms? This lack of application and active discussion is an area Bogost treads lightly around. His focus is not on how educators, activists, and others can apply videogames as persuasive communication. Bogost does not provide practical guidelines or “how to” recommendations. The book’s focus and intent is on providing a framework and explanation of how and why games can influence people and ideas, not how to create games to do so.

Another limit is that some of Bogost’s analysis of games with social messages is not unique. Barrett (2006), Murray (2005), and others have critically analyzed Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas in the past as both a commentary on society and a contradiction in race relation. Bogost applies his theory of procedural literacy to this previous work to discuss how GTA: San Andreas is effective in achieving this social and racial commentary by actively requiring the player make decisions about what to wear or eat, and who to spend time with. Bogost also builds on the work of others in his discussion of licensing games and products. His discussion of Harry Potter and licensing is similar to the research done by MIT’s Henry Jenkins (2006) on transmedia. Bogost describes how the Quidditch World Cup game, published by EA, created a larger experience in a licensed world. Through the gameplay, players experienced events beyond the books and movies. Andrew Burn’s research (2004) describes a similar relationship between children and the cross media experiences of Harry Potter. Bogost does not build on the work of literature scholars, but as was his method with Grand Theft Auto he provides a procedural explanation of why the videogame experience influences the player and enriches their experience of a licensed world. While Bogost’s explanation is not unique, it takes existing scholarship and fits it into his procedural literacy framework.

Bogost continued his creation of a procedural rhetoric by setting up a theoretical framework in a variety of disciplines. He did so in his discussion of the political, social, cultural, and educational applications of persuasive videogames. His discussion of educational games begins with a detailed review and application of educational theorists. Vygotsky, Dewey, Piaget, and others all are applied and related to videogames. The argument that procedural literacy creates learning is easier to make for Bogost, since much of the text describes what people are learning and experiences in games. Procedural literacy creates educational experiences where the player learns through action, decision, and consequences. Videogames like Civilization, SimCity, and Flight Simulator have actively used processes in gameplay to teach players experiences and put them into real life roles for decades. Bogost sees this procedural learning as the key of what games can teach. To
this extent he levels criticism at Gee (2003) and Beck and Wade (2004) for being too limited in their discussion and application of what games can teach. For Bogost, games can do more than simply serve as a metaphor to create a new ways of thinking and problem solving. Games teach specific relationships and put players into experiences they can directly connect to life. Bogost’s analysis of the educational application and connection to videogames gives further support to those looking to create serious and educational games.

In addition to these fields of application, Bogost touches upon moral and faith based issues in persuasive games and exercise games as well. Both the discussions are limited compared to other sections of his work and feels more like an attempt to create an inclusionary work. And that inclusionary work is ultimately what Bogost creates. Bogost’s contribution in this text is a framework to discuss games as not just simulations, or art, or metaphors, but as works of communication that can express specific ideas through gameplay. This communication can be overt or subtle, but the messages, experiences, and learning the player engages in make videogames a powerful tool. Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames can be a powerful tool for communicating the potential of videogames throughout academia.

Bogost’s work is easy to recommend. In spite of the criticisms, the inclusive scope, theoretical framework, and supporting examples create a valuable resource for those outside of existing game disciplines. The value for those actively creating games is in the text’s ability to provide a theory behind the design and support the ongoing research and creation of games for learning. Bogost does succeed in creating a theoretical framework for how and why videogames can move and influence people’s lives. Persuasive Games provides teachers, researchers, and designers an explanation of why games are expressive and persuasive communication tools.

REFERENCES


Paul A.D. Waelchli is the current Information Literacy & Instruction Librarian for St. Norbert College where he is charged with building a library instruction program applying video game strategies as pedagogy. In his former position at the Charles C. Myers Library at the University of Dubuque, Waelchli developed lesson plans incorporating gaming strategies into the classroom. Waelchli has authored chapters for both American Library Association (ALA) and the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) publications on using video games and gaming strategies to teach information literacy. Since 2006, Waelchli has written about video games.
strategies, information literacy, and education on his blog Research Quest. He was recognized by the ACRL in August of 2007 as a featured member profile and was recently appointed to a position on the ALA’s Libraries, Literacy, and Gaming Expert Group. In addition to his work in libraries, Waelchli has collaborated on research with Andrew Bub, creator of Gamerdad.com. He holds a Master’s of Arts in Teaching from Clarke College and a Master’s of Library and Information Science from the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee.