Chapter 17

Procedural Ethos: Confirming the Persuasive in Serious Games

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ABSTRACT

How is it that serious games are actually persuasive? Ian Bogost’s work on serious (or persuasive) games provides essential philosophical foundations for the genre though, as the article demonstrates, sufficient detail of argument is lacking. Bogost uses the model of classical rhetoric to demonstrate that games can make arguments through “procedural rhetoric,” which he exemplifies with games like Molleindustria’s McDonald’s Videogame, a title that can best be identified as parody. However, such games, while attempting to make persuasive arguments, lack classical requisites for persuasion, leaving room for further critical inquiry and development of understanding of how serious games work. To be considered persuasive, serious games should additionally demonstrate the components of ethos, which include: phronesis (practical knowledge, factual basis), arête (integrity, virtue), and eunoia (goodwill, concern for the hearer). It is insufficient for serious games to have procedural rhetoric without taking account of procedural ethos. Analyses of the McDonald’s game and the ReDistricting Game are conducted for an initial verification of this proposal. This description of how serious games can be persuasive can provide additional conceptual tools to game developers, instructional designers, and educational scholars attempting to leverage serious games for intentional, productive, and predictable learning.

How is it that serious games are actually persuasive? Dr. Ian Bogost’s (2008) work, The Rhetoric of Video Games, offers provocative, though incomplete, evidence that serious games are persuasive. Nevertheless, some such as Smith (2007) have pointed out that substantive empirical or anecdotal examples to validate such claims are missing. To his credit, Bogost has recently conducted pioneering scholarship into how games might persuade through the use of a construct labeled procedural rhetoric, “the practice of using processes persuasively” (Bogost, 2008, p. 125), employing the model of classical rhetoric. To illustrate the procedural rhetoric scheme being proposed, Bogost reviews the online Flash game Molleindustria’s McDonald’s Videogame (pp.
While such parody games undoubtedly place the player in scenarios meant to generate thought-provoking arguments, they may lack certain requisites for persuasion under the model of classical rhetoric that Bogost adopts for his work. When playing this game, one is prompted to ask from a persuasive position: Where are the supporting facts? Are the arguments fair? Are the developers qualified to make them, and are game mechanics deployed in a way (intentional or not) that belie self-interest? Bogost is also concerned about the danger of “empty rhetoric” (p. 123), but neglects to provide further argument or evidence to advance a resolution of this shortcoming. This article, subsequently, aims to complement Bogost’s original work by exploring the addition of ethos to procedural rhetoric for a more comprehensive position on persuasion. This expanded description of how games can be made persuasive could provide additional conceptual tools to instructional designers and game developers attempting in their own work to leverage serious games for intended learning outcomes and game objectives (Reiber, 2006; Schell, 2008). Attention to the persuasive qualities of games, and how they can and should be intentionally designed and developed, could not be more important as the adoption of video games for education, formal and informal, is gaining increasing scrutiny (Gee, 2010; Ito et al., 2009; Honey & Hamilton, 2011).

Aristotle is the father of classical rhetorical theory, and his Rhetoric is still regarded by most rhetoricians as “the most important single work on persuasion ever written” (Golden et al., 2007, p. 67). “Persuasion,” writes Aristotle, “is clearly a sort of demonstration, since we are most fully persuaded when we consider a thing to have been demonstrated” (I.i.1354b). And in his Rhetoric, he identifies ethos as what is required in a speaker to make an argument persuasive (I.ii.1356a). Ethos, Aristotle insists, is not mere moral competence, as the term is often employed. In persuasive rhetoric,
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