Chapter 4

A Theoretical Model for the Study of Persuasive Communication through Digital Games

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author presents a theoretical model for the study of how persuasive messages can be conveyed through digital games. The objective of developing this new theoretical model is to make visible how persuasiveness can be structured within digital games and to help identify specific aspects of persuasive games that might not be obvious to the naked eye, by giving them order and intelligibility. This model may facilitate the study and implementation of persuasive strategies within advergames from a new and specific perspective. In the first part of the chapter, the author justifies the reasons why the author has chosen to work with a theoretical model. In the second part, the author describes the three characteristics that define these theoretical models and present the new theoretical model as well as a visual representation of it.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I presents a theoretical model for the purpose of explaining how persuasive messages can be conveyed through digital games (Filloy et al., 2008, p. 32). What differentiates a theoretical model from a theory is not its function but the way it fulfills the function it is built for (Filloy, Puig, & Rojano, 2008, p. 32). Theoretical models provide explanations “based on assumptions that can be simplified,” and this is what differentiates them from theories (Filloy et al., 2008, p. 32). Although models are theoretical, they need experiments to demonstrate their validity and to prove their capacity to provide new insights on existing knowledge. After experiments are conducted, “often models have to be modified in
response” (Barlow & Mills, 2009, p. 10) to their results. However, without the theoretical model “those experiments would not have been carried out, and the knowledge which arises would have remained unknown” (2009, p. 10). It follows that theories are considered more accurate than theoretical models (Filloy et al., 2008, p. 32).

Yet a theoretical model has other advantages. The reason why I choose to work on a theoretical model is because models are proposed with the intention of being used for specific purposes usually related to the understanding of the structure of the object of study (Filloy et al., 2008, p. 30). This also makes theoretical models different from theories because proposing a model “is equivalent to suggesting it as a representation that provides at least some approximation to the real situation; furthermore, it means admitting the possibility of alternative representations that may be useful for different purposes” (2008, p. 30). In this study I do not aim to produce a conclusive, all-encompassing theory of advergames’ persuasiveness, but, based on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework and using the theoretical model presented here, I aim to structure important theories from different fields and make them comprehensible in a model that can be useful for a better understanding of how persuasive messages can be conveyed through digital games.

In order to understand how digital games can be designed to convey meaning I rely on game scholars Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) statements that refer to semiotic principles to explain how digital games convey meaning. Salen and Zimmerman explain that players create meaning when they interpret a series of signs within a system to establish relationships between them. Furthermore, the authors explain that the context in which these signs are interpreted affects the way the player makes sense of them (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 364). In this chapter, I build upon Salen and Zimmerman’s statements to claim that persuasiveness can be implemented within digital games by making use of three persuasive levels: (1) the signs embedded within the game, (2) the system that allows players to interact with the signs of the game and (3) the context in which games are played. In this new theoretical model I identify all the persuasive dimensions that can be used within digital games and explain how these persuasive dimensions are structured according to the three levels of persuasion.

**METHODOLOGY**

In order to outline the first version of my theoretical model, I followed the four steps proposed by the film theorists Casetti and Di Chio (1994, p. 34): (1) segmentation: in this step I used theoretical triangulation to divide the object of analysis into several parts; (2) stratification: in this step I used theoretical triangulation and the observations made during the content analysis of the fifty-eight advergames to identify different internal elements within each of these parts; (3) enumeration and classification: in this step I created a small descriptive map that has helped me to continue the process; (4) regrouping and modeling: in this final step I proposed a representative model for the object of study. This process enabled me to propose the first version of the theoretical mode for the study of persuasive games. The theoretical model can be used to conduct in-depth analysis of the persuasive structure of an advergame taking into consideration the unique characteristics of such persuasive games.

Theoretical triangulation refers to the use of “alternative or competing theories in preference to utilizing one viewpoint only” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 142). In this case, I started this research by conducting a literature review of previous works from the fields of game studies, media studies and studies of persua-