Chapter 20

Documentary at Play

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ABSTRACT

Docu-games designate a versatile group of games that have in common an attempt to depict and reflect on aspects of reality such as military conflicts, historical periods, or contemporary political and socio-cultural issues. As such, docu-games have become a new communication tool for individuals or organizations. This chapter explores different perspectives on games as documentaries, going beyond the mere subject matter and visualization of docu-games to approach questions about simulations as statements about reality and gameplay as a tool for communicating statements about reality. Combining cognitive documentary and games theory with content analysis, the chapter offers a theoretical framework for understanding how docu-games reference the relationship between reality and game, as well as how they establish credibility in relation to these representations.

INTRODUCTION

Videogames are increasingly used as strategic communication tools that offer new ways of representing subject matter and depicting real-life situations. However, they differ in profound ways from more linear types of communication by integrating audiences in interactive modes of experience. This calls for a new understanding of the communication that takes place and new concepts for assessing the credibility of videogames as statements about reality.

In this context, docu-games are particularly interesting. Docu-games are a diverse group of games, but what they have in common is an attempt to depict and reflect on aspects of reality such as military conflict, historical periods, or contemporary political and socio-cultural issues. As such, docu-games have become a new tool for individuals or organizations to communicate their agendas, issues, and interests. However, in order to understand docu-games, it is important to explore the ways in which games can be understood as documentary and how they can make statements about reality.

This chapter will explore different perspectives on games as documentaries, going beyond the mere subject matter and visualization of docu-games toward questions about simulations as conveyors of statements about reality (Bogost, 2007; Nieborg,
By applying current documentary theory and game studies to docu-games, we hope this chapter transcends and adds to current thinking about how games relate to notions of credibility, reality, and real life, and how they reference the relationship between the real world and games.

**BETWEEN REPRESENTATION AND REALITY**

The emergence of new hybrid and interactive forms of documentary such as newsgames, persuasive games, crowd-sourced documentaries, database documentaries and docu-games has rekindled the debates about the relationship between fact and fiction and representation and reality, debates which have raged since the birth of documentary film. Recently, and in following this tradition, critics have questioned the ways, if at all, docu-games can be seen as being able to refer to—and make credible statements about—reality.

In “Reality Play: Documentary Computer Games Beyond Fact and Fiction,” Joost Raessens held the term “documentary game” up to critical review. Based on analyzing gaming experiences from playing these games and the statements they make about reality, Raessens (2006) concluded that documentary games occupy a space in between objectivity and subjectivity and therefore neither represent reality objectively nor exist as mere subjective renderings of the game designers. Inspired by Michael Renov’s (2004, 2009) writings about the autobiographical documentary, Sanchez-Laws (2010) explored whether the immersive potential of digital storytelling might lead to a new documentary form, albeit one that depicts a first-person perspective on reality and therefore an ultimately subjective version of the truth. Similarly, comparing docu-games to other kinds of real-life simulations (e.g., the forensic modelling that is now accepted in courts in the United States), Fullerton (2008) conceded that documentary as simulation holds the promise of accurate depictions of reality, but is sceptical toward docu-games as sources of information about the real world at this point in time. Again drawing on Renov, Fullerton argued that the involvement of the viewers leads to a subjective point of view, which undermines objectivity and creates an uncertain reference to reality. For these authors, docu-games’ reference to reality is either indeterminate or, at best, subjective. However, Renov (2004, 2009) focused on documentary as the expressive strategies of a subject and to a lesser extent on the ways in which documentary texts position themselves vis-à-vis the reality they describe. Therefore, this chapter will instead combine game studies with the rhetoric and cognitive documentary theories of Carl Plantinga (1997, 2005), Ib Bondebjerg (2002, 2008, forthcoming 2012) and Paul Ward (2005, 2009) and make the case that docu-games can make credible and valid statements about reality.

Following a brief overview of the relationship between documentary films and reality through the history of this genre, this chapter will outline current cognitive documentary film theory, as well as chart the relationship between audiovisual representation, narrative contextualization, and procedural rhetorics crucial to the understanding of the communicative function of computer games in contemporary game studies. These theoretical approaches will then be combined to inform the analysis of docu-games, most prominently KUMA Wars: Afghan Air Strikes and Global Conflicts: Afghanistan and in this way argue that docu-games can make credible and valid statements about reality.