An analysis of the procedural rhetoric and values of cart life.

Bogost (2008) suggested the use of the term *procedural rhetoric* to indicate the use of processes as a persuasive tool. Unlike oratory and visual rhetoric, which have been common practice for centuries, procedural rhetoric has only recently been developed as a tool for persuasion in the form of videogames. Videogames do not just show or explain whatever they wish to claim, they have the player perform the actions, a far more impressionistic representation of the issue. *Cart Life* is an example of one such game. It attempts to influence its players opinions by having them play under a certain ruleset.

In *Cart Life* you play as one of three characters, all of whom have multiple issues in their life at this moment, including financial worry. You take control of their lives just as they set out on a journey to own their own business, some form of retail stand. Upon starting the game the player is given little to no instruction, and it will often take several attempts before the player understands the game’s systems enough to start having success. This has multiple inferences, such as the lack of help people receive when setting out in the world to make a life, or how life can be unfair when bad things happen to people who don’t deserve it. This can be particularly poignant with the character Andrus, who has recently arrived from Ukraine and must deal with being in a foreign land with new rules and is struggling to communicate.

If players do persevere they find themselves in a monotonous and ruthlessly tiring routine, struggling to afford day-to-day expenses, never mind reach the practically impossible goal of their character. It is not just work that the player must tend to, as each character has addictions they must deal with. Andrus smokes and must care for his cat, who is his only connection, while Melanie must drop off and pick up her daughter every day from school. Each character has a very personal and detailed story. In the case of Melanie, she is recently divorced and attempting win custody of her child, which can only be done if she has a good relationship with her daughter and proves her business is a success. These stories allow the player to form an emotional attachment to the character, and reinforce every high and low of the game to increase its overall impact.

All of this is done in an extremely short space of time, as time is accelerated and does not pause. This all leads to a tiring, and frankly depressing day, where there is not enough time and even small tasks such as eating become too much to deal with. The only escape is in the form of a dream sequence, where the player sees a representation of what is happening in their character’s head.

This is reinforced by the visuals of the game. Various anchoring techniques (Hullman and Diakopoulos, 2011) are used to portray the values of the game such as the frank comparison of your income and expenditure at the end of the day. The game is animated in a simple, pixel art-style that helps the player project themselves onto the characters, and is in stark contrast to the end of each day when you see the character in far more detail in the shower, exhausted. The soundtrack also reinforces the game’s mechanics, as it can often be described as mournful.

It is not all negative however. Work is represented in the form of repetitive, menial tasks that the players are supposed to get faster and faster at. Eventually they should experience pride in this work like many retail workers, and if they grow to be successful maybe even the pride of owning their own business. And the monotony of everyday life is permeated by interactions with the other characters who populate the world, and with whom relationships can form.

The processes of the game are intended to enforce a sense of sympathy on the player for real people who find themselves in this position. To help them understand the trials someone in low-paid retail work may face, such as poor nutrition. It is, effectively, a game that tries to persuade the player to agreeing with the games values, something videogames are very effective at \*\*\*. Of course this will not happen if the player interprets the game’s systems in a different manner. With accidental alternate reading \*\*\* the player may take other ideas away from the experience, such as the low-profitability of retail businesses justifying the low wages of their workers.

Another issue facing *Cart Life* is its reception in other cultures. Videogames are effected by the culture of their designers, and as such can become cultural artefacts themselves. For example, *The Sims* is heavily based on western consumerism, to the point where many people view the game as a parody \*\*\*. Or *Animal Crossing* (Bogost, 2008) showing the slow and relentless decline into debt that most adults experience, despite the game’s friendly exterior. *Cart Life* is based on a similar theme, and in cultures that have far less experience with the issues present in the game (consumerism, retail-work, custody battles for children etc.) the game may not have the impact it wishes. It may have no impact at all.

*Cart Life* makes great use of procedural rhetoric to impart its values onto players. Showing the cruel reality of life for low-paid workers through its systems, all backed up through the games aesthetics and put to the backdrop of a deep and realistic city full of characters.