



The Rhetoric of Video Games

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Intro.

- Idea of video games encompassing more than just freedom and play time but actually are conditioning us for the real world.
- Animal Crossing
- Teaches player about consuming and debt, and how Tom Nook is leverage capital about the player.
- Video games have a unique ethos
- People who play video games develop values, strategies
 - Example: Animal Crossing Community (ACC)



Figure 1

A player near her house in *Animal Crossing*. While it looks like just an idyllic cartoon world, the game also models commerce and debt.



Play

- Video games are considered play.
- Video games are simply playthings to both adults and children.
- *“Play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure”*. -Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman
- Play refers to the “possibility space” created by constraints of all kinds. Play activities are not rooted in on social practice, but in many social and material practices.
 - Example of the play in a mechanism: a steering column



- Play also refers to the physical properties of the play space, as well as the equipment, time allotted, and number and type of children.

Possibility Spaces

- The possibility space refers to the expressive opportunities afforded by rules of composition, form, or genre.
- It is the renegotiation of rules and relationships within a space.
- Oulipo
 - Oulipian writers: First they create a possibility space, then they fill that space with meaning by exploring the free movement within the rigid structure of literary rules.
- The possibility space refers to the myriad configurations the player might construct to see the ways the processes inscribed in the system work in the game.



Game Interactions

- The gestures, experiences, and interactions a game's rules allow and disallow make up the game's significance.
- Video games represent processes in the material world.
 - such as war, urban planning, sports, and etc.
- Games create new possibility spaces for exploring those topics.
- Explore the the games possibility of space through play.



Procedurality

- *Procedures* are sets of constraints that create possibility spaces, which can be explored through play.
- Procedural systems generate behaviors based on rule based models, and they are machines capable of producing many outcomes, each conforming to the same overall guidelines.
- Video games tend to emphasize procedurality more than other types of software programs.
- Video games depict imagined system by imposing sets of rules that create particular possibility spaces for play.
- Games creating representation of ordinary world that might give players new perspectives on the world they inhabit.
 - Animal Crossing
 - Doom
 - SimCity



Rhetoric

Sometimes games use procedurality to make claims about the cultural, social, or material aspects of human experience.

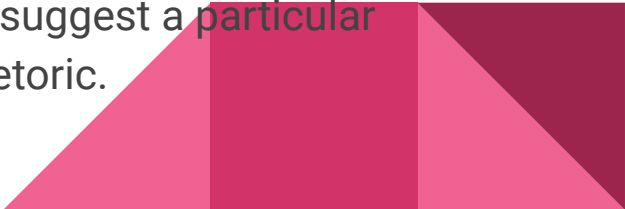
- When we talk about making claims or arguments about things, we enter the domain of **rhetoric**, the field of communication that deals with persuasive speech.
- Today rhetoric invokes largely negative connotations--elaborate and well-crafted speech that is nevertheless devoid of actual meaning
- The term rhetoric first appears in Plato's *Gorgias* 2,500 years ago, derives from the rhetor or orator, and his practice, oratory, meant public speaking for civic purposes.
- Aristotle attempts a systematic, philosophical approach to the art of persuasive oratory; he argues that rhetorical practice has the final cause of persuasion to correct judgment.
- The variety of rhetoric implies an understanding of both the reasons to persuade and the tools available to achieve that end.
- Twentieth-century rhetorician Kenneth Burke identifies the need to identify with others as the ancestor of the practice of rhetoric. He extends rhetoric beyond persuasion.
- Burke's understanding of humans as creators and consumers of symbolic systems expands rhetoric to include nonverbal domains known and yet to be invented or discovered.

Rhetoric

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- His expansion of the concept is particularly useful for our interest in video game rhetoric
- The emergence of photographic and cinematic expression in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggested a need to understand how those new, nonverbal media mount arguments. This subfield is called visual rhetoric: advertisements, photographs, illustrations etc.
- Visual rhetoric does not account for procedural representation
- Images are frequently constructed, selected, or sequenced in code, making the stock tools of visual rhetoric inadequate.
- Image is subordinate to process.
- **Digital rhetoric** often abstracts the computer as a consideration, focusing on the text and image content a machine might host and the communities of practice in which that content is created and used. E-mail, Web sites, message boards, blogs, and wikis are examples of these targets.

Procedural Rhetoric

- The practice of using processes persuasively
 - entails expression—to convey ideas effectively
 - its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models. In computation, those rules are authored in code, through the practice of programming.
 - Procedural rhetoric affords a new and promising way to make claims about *how things work*.
 - Since assembling rules together to describe the function of systems produces procedural representation, assembling particular rules that suggest a particular function of a particular system characterizes procedural rhetoric.
 - procedural rhetoric as models
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Procedural Rhetoric

- Example 1: **Animal Crossing**
- the model of consumer capitalism, Games like Animal Crossing demonstrate that such models include, but extend far beyond physical and formal models to include, arguments about how social, cultural, and political processes work as well.
- Example 2: **The McDonald's Videogame**
- a critique of McDonald's business practices by Italian art collective Molleindustria,
- *Anti Advergames*: games created to censure or disparage a company rather than support it.
- The player must make difficult business choices, but more importantly he must make difficult moral choices.
- Bribe/bulldoze rainforest/dismantle indigenous settlements/growth hormones for rapid production/corruption
- mounts a procedural rhetoric about the necessity of corruption
- in the global fast food business, and the overwhelming temptation of greed, which leads to more corruption.
- Players learn to “read” this argument in the system of play and can interpret the relevance of the argument in the context of their own lives.



Figure 2
Molleindustria's *McDonald's Videogame* makes a procedural argument about the business ethics of fast food. Here, the player manages corporate communications.



Figure 3
The player of the *McDonald's Videogame* makes ethical and material choices about third-world farming and governance.

Ways of Using Procedural Rhetoric: Interrogating Ideology

- One use of procedural rhetoric is to expose and explain the hidden ways of thinking that often drive social, political, or cultural behavior. We often call such logics *ideology*
- Video games can help shed light on ideological biases
- Example: **America's Army: Operations**
- In 2002, the U.S. Army released an unprecedented government-funded first-person shooter game
- conceived and openly publicized as an Army **recruiting and communications tool**, one crafted "to recreate the US Army for the benefit of young civilians."
- Within the first six months, over a million users had registered, of which over 600,000 had completed the game's basic rifle marksmanship and combat training (BCT), a necessary step before gaining access to combat missions



Figure 4

America's Army, a high production value simulation of life in the U.S. Army, meant for recruiting and public relations.

Ways of Using Procedural Rhetoric: Interrogating Ideology

- Players are encouraged to **collaborate** in short missions, not to log as many kills as possible as in *counter-strike*
 - Continued violation of the **rules** may cause a player to be eliminated from the game. To rejoin, he must create a new ID and restart
 - Ribbons, medals, and other designations reward successful completion of military objectives.
 - Proceduralized this value system.
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- On first blush, America's Army would appear to be a superb example of epistemic games: the game **models the values and practices** of the army, giving the player an embodied experience of the recruit. However, America's Army also shows that **epistemic games bear a risk**: sometimes, we may want to question the values of professional practices rather than assume those values blindly. Procedural rhetoric offers an approach to do so.



Figure 4
America's Army, a high production value simulation of life in the U.S. Army, meant for recruiting and public relations.

Ways of Using Procedural Rhetoric: Making and Unpacking an Argument

- video games can also be created to make explicit claims about the way a material or conceptual system works.
- example : *Take Back Illinois*
- Early fall 2004, the Illinois House Republicans commissioned a game to represent their positions on several public policy issues at the center of their 2004 state legislative election.
- medical malpractice tort reform, education standards policy, and local economic development
- attempts to create a complex, interrelated procedural rhetoric that communicated the candidates' positions on these topics.
- Four subgames comprise the game, three for each of the policy issues and one game about citizen participation.
- *Take Back Illinois* maintained a set of scores for each subgame and used those scores as inputs for settings in other games. For example, higher performance in the educational reform subgame increased the efficiency of job training centers in the economic development game.

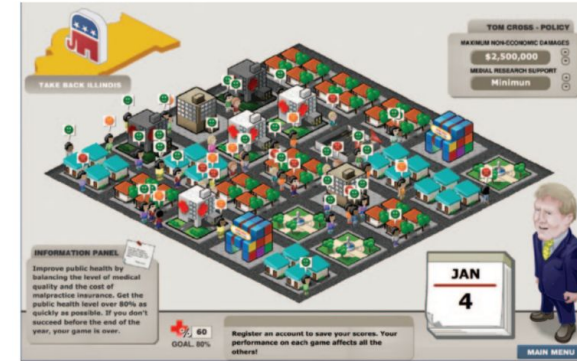


Figure 5
A public policy game in *Take Back Illinois*, this one about tort reform.

Ways of Using Procedural Rhetoric: Making and Unpacking an Argument

- To play the game successfully, the player is forced to acknowledge the campaign's position on the issues it represents
- The game's procedural rhetoric is a compressed version of the campaign's policy position.
- Another example: *Bully*, from Rockstar Games
- the player takes the role of Jimmy Hopkins, an adolescent just dropped off at Bullworth Academy by his disinterested mother and stepfather, who are on the way to their lavish honeymoon.
- Jimmy struggles to get by amidst the conflicted social situation of high school politics.
- *Bully* models the social environment of high school through an expressive system of rules, and makes a procedural argument for the necessity of confrontation. Confronting bullies is not a desirable or noble action in the game, but it is necessary if one wants to restore justice.
- part social commentary, part satire, also entertainment

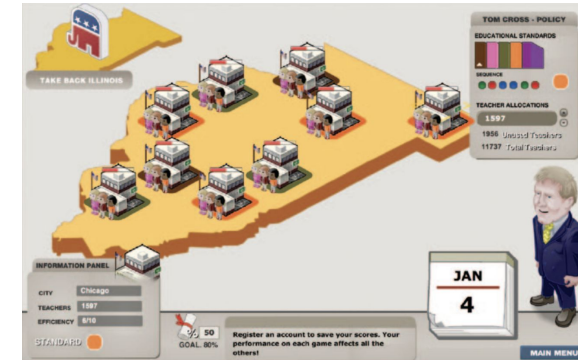


Figure 8
Although many critics thought *Bully* was a celebration of schoolyard harassment, it is a model of the social politics of high school more than a hazing sim.

Ways of Using Procedural Rhetoric: Making and Unpacking an Argument

- 3rd example: the Will Wright/Maxis game *Spore*.
- the player starts with a microorganism and grows it into a complex sentient creature, then a civilization, then a military power, and finally a space-traveling superrace
- Wright explained that the real topic he hoped to address in the game was **astrobiology**, the study of life throughout the cosmos
- In the theory Wright hopes to advance in his video game, intelligent life does not occur and grow naturally, but is cultured and transported from planet to planet by other, more advanced civilizations.
- the concept of seed spread by wind or other environmental factors; these reproductive structures are called spores
- While a book might make this argument by explaining the process, in *Spore* the player discovers the argument by playing in the possibility space the game's rules create.
- This act of discovering a procedural argument through play is endemic to procedural rhetoric



Figure 9
Spore advances a perspective on the development of planetary life by simulating a theory from astrobiology.

Learning From Procedural Rhetoric/takeaway

- The sort of play that we perform is not always the stuff of leisure.
- Rather, when we play, we explore the possibility space of a set of rules—we learn to understand and evaluate a game's meaning.
- playing video games as a kind of literacy
- Any social or cultural practice can be understood as a set of processes, and our understanding of each of them can be taught, supported, or challenged through video games.
- We learn to play games with an eye toward uncovering their procedural rhetorics, we learn to ask questions about the models such games present.
- Cultural attention moves from linear media like books and film to procedural, random-access media like software and video games
- Parents must begin playing games critically themselves, perhaps unlearning decades of treating video games as mere distraction.



Learning From Procedural Rhetoric/takeaway

- Educators also have a role to play... not be used pedagogically
 - adopting video games as artifacts to be discussed alongside traditional media in subjects like literature, language arts, history, and art, teaching game playing as an argumentative and expressive practice alongside reading, writing, and debating.
 - Procedural rhetoric has a role to play in the way we teach programming and video game development.
 - By luring kids into computer science through video game development, we can attempt to increase dwindling interest in math, science, and technology.
 - Video games have the power to make arguments, to persuade, to express ideas.
 - But they do not do so inevitably.
 - We need to play video games in order to understand the possibility spaces their rules create, and then to explore those possibility spaces and accept, challenge, or reject them in our daily lives.
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