Emergently–Persuasive Games:
How Players of *SF0* Persuade Themselves

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case identifies and exemplifies a potential subset of persuasive games, called emergently persuasive games. These are games that focus more on unspecified, player-led persuasion as opposed to persuasion based on specific, designer-led outcomes. The game described in this case is SF0, and its players have been observed to have become more outgoing, creative, and wise, despite only an incidental, general level of pre-designed persuasion being advertised. It is demonstrated that the ambiguous rules of the game allow the players to customise the gameplay based on their everyday needs, and therefore decide for themselves whether and how they want to be persuaded. These creative interpretations of the rules are actively encouraged, rather than being discouraged as they would be in other games. The ongoing player-discussion of conflicting interpretations facilitates a very effective constructivist environment for self-improvement and understanding. Data was analysed from 24 players of SF0, and a Grounded Theory was generated both to explain the general observations of the player data and to identify the diverse ways in which real-world benefit has arisen.

BACKGROUND

The research described in this case encompassed the main study of my PhD thesis on the subject of real-world benefit through gameplay. The study was carried out in the UK at the University of Portsmouth's School of Creative Technologies, where I teach as a Senior Lecturer on the BSc (Hons) Computer Games Technology course. I am a member of the School's Advanced Games Research Group, which brings together the diverse research interests of the staff and students, and our members' recent outstanding successes include the creation of the games studio *thechineseroom*, whose research-informed game *Dear Esther* (2012) was released to widespread critical acclaim. Over the past 6 years I have been heavily involved in organising and running educational "Game Jam" events in conjunction with partners in the UK, France, Denmark, and the USA, as part of my ongoing goal to build links with games developers and other academic institutions, while leveraging the social, educational, and employability benefits of problem-based game development exercises.

SETTING THE STAGE

This project was originally intended to be an exploratory study on the use of *ambiguity* in experimental game design. Typically in games, ambiguity is something to be avoided; it is regarded as a nuisance, or a hallmark of badly-worded rules or poorly-considered systems design. Generally speaking, if the current game state or pertinent rules of play are ambiguous, players will need to compromise, reach an agreement, or consult an adjudicator if harmonious play is to continue.

However, there are a number of games in which ambiguity, and the resulting discussion on conflicting interpretations, is *encouraged* as a key feature of gameplay. This case concerns such a game: *SF0* (sometimes written *SFZero*) is a highly-ambiguous game played both on the internet (at www.sf0.org) and in the physical everyday world. 24 players of *SF0* were interviewed, with the intention being to investigate the nature of the gameplay and the appeal of such an ambiguous game. However, due to unexpected developments in the interviews, the focus of the study was drawn away from ambiguity towards the more noticeable issue of real-world benefits that the players were getting as a result of persuasiveness in *SF0*, hence the applicability of the case to this book.

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