Chapter LVI
Saving Worlds with Video Game Activism

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ABSTRACT

Due to its nature as an interactive medium, the video game offers uniquely different approaches to the project of activism. Unlike other audio/visual media like film and TV, video games consist of processes enacted by players. More specific, they contain rules systems known as algorithms that the player navigates to become successful at the game. And through that process of learning that algorithm a new form of rhetoric is born. Ian Bogost labels this unique form as procedural rhetoric: "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures." Through gamic actions players internalize not only the rules, but also the rhetoric of that rule system. To demonstrate precisely how procedural rhetoric works through video game technologies, this chapter presents a definition for video game activism as well as three distinct modes: original design, engine appropriation, and machinima. Using three recent case studies, the chapter suggests some of the implications for educators and why they should take video games seriously as means of political expression when teaching students about civic duty.

SAVING WORLDS WITH VIDEO GAME ACTIVISM

Can a video game save the world? Well that would depend on which world we are talking about. In the case of Hyrule from the Legend of Zelda series, the answer would be absolutely. But in the case of increasing genocide in Darfur, mounting school violence in the U.S., or persisting racial tensions in France, the answer gets more complicated. The truth is no single medium could ever lay claim to having any lasting impact on a political or social issue without being indicted for its hubris or dismissed for its naiveté. And as a medium still in its infancy, the video game continues to struggle to even find legitimacy

within the mainstream culture. Therefore, the very notion of video games serving a function beyond entertainment, elevated to the level of political expression, poses a number of challenges to how we think of this medium. This chapter, however, suggests that video game technologies offer a unique form of rhetoric that opens up new avenues for political and social activism. With the population of gamers increasing each year, recent estimations state that 69% of American heads of household play video games, the notion of gaming being the pastime of just teenage boys has become outmoded (Entertainment Software Association, 2007). Gamers now represent a broader spectrum of the demographic than ever before and thus offer a new channel of access by which politically and socially minded discourse can be distributed. As a project, activism works largely outside of mainstream culture, providing alternative viewpoints, which requires constant reinvention. Harnessing the power of video game technology for activist pursuits only marks the next logical step of adaptability to a constantly evolving media environment. Volumes such as this indicate the significant role that video games now play in our lives, requiring that educators understand how video games contribute to the identities of our students. Because imparting a sense of civic duty is perhaps one of the most important parts of any education, it only makes sense to introduce how video games now function as a part of being a citizen in the digital age.

For the purposes of our discussion here video game activism is understood as the intentional use of video game technology to bring about social or political change. To be clear, gaming and poltics is hardly a new concept. In fact, dating back to around 2000B.C., an Egyptian mural depicting a game known as t'au was one of the precursors to chess (Halter, 2006). These early war games up to and including chess have been largely understood as tactical military training tools as much as recreational distractions. This trend has continued on forth through to video games, manifesting in its most recent iteration: America's Army. Commissioned by the U.S. Army, this game functions both as a marketing tool for recruitment as well as a training tool for new soldiers, teaching them everything from tactical movement to the code of military conduct. It is important to note here that video game activism is not just simply the marriage of video games and politics, as contemporary examples like America's Army (2005) and historical examples like Battlezone (1980) illustrate. Just as in any other form of media, simply having a political agenda does not necessarily constitute a form of activism. And while an in-depth history and discussion of the project of activism is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is necessary to distinguish it from these other forms of political discourse. At its core, activism is about initiating change which often implies standing on the outside of the dominant group, representing a marginalized viewpoint. Therefore, the militaristic ideologies set forth in both America's Army and Battlezone both function as rhetorical strategies to advance a certain political agenda. However, as part of the dominant worldview they attempt to maintain that established belief more than try to change it. Video game activism then requires an attempt to change the status quo as much as having any sort of political message, differentiating it from convential wargames.

Due to its subaltern status, video game activism typically functions outside of the commercial gaming industry. Whether funded through non-profit organizations or created by a single individual, operating outside of market influences marks an important distinction from other forms of gaming. Not beholden to fiscal concerns, the examples of video game activism outlined in this chapter illustrate ways in which the adoption and appropriation of gaming technologies allows for a powerful new means of access to a growing population. Though not specifically termed video game activism, the uses of these technologies to influence and change ideas sits along a historical

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