

Preface

Videogames are an expressive medium. They represent how real and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them. As part of the ongoing process of understanding this medium and pushing it further as players, developers, and critics, we must strive to understand how to construct and critique the representations of our world in videogame form.

Despite their commercial success, videogames still struggle for acceptance as a cultural form.¹ Critic James Newman offers two possible reasons. First, he suggests, videogames are perceived as a children's medium, "easily denigrated as trivial—something that will be 'grown out of'—and demanding no investigation."² It is common to hear parents, educators, and policymakers equate videogame playing with idle time, time that could be put to better use. Yet, even if videogames were merely a children's medium (which they are not, and never were), this reason alone does not adequately explain why they would escape respect.³ Children's literature has enjoyed considerable popularity in both popular and academic contexts. For example, the Modern Language Association (MLA) maintains a group for children's literature, which in turn produces an annual, *Children's Literature*, which "publishes theoretically based articles that address key issues in the field."⁴ Hollins University offers masters degrees in the study and writing of children's literature.⁵ Even comics, which enjoyed broad readership among kids and adults alike before the adoption of the 1954 Comics Code, still benefit from occasional critical acclaim and attention.⁶ The University of Florida supports comics studies,

where English professor Donald Ault recently established a peer-reviewed academic journal on comics and graphic novels, called *ImageText*.⁷ Even if it were accurate, the mere perception of videogames as children's culture is not a sufficient explanation for their resulting critical inattention.

A more convincing quandary emerges from the correlation between videogames and children's culture. That quandary is *triviality*. Videogames are considered inconsequential because they are perceived to serve no cultural or social function save distraction at best, moral baseness at worst. Newman cites this triviality as the second explanation for the medium's struggle for legitimacy. Videogames, he argues, are perceived to be "mere trifles—low art—carrying none of the weight, gravitas or credibility of more traditional media."⁸ This is not a new problem in the history of culture. Comics, television, and even film once endured popular and critical scorn. The relative maturity of each medium explains part of the problem. Says noted videogame (and comics) critic Henry Jenkins, "If it's 1910 and you ask, 'What's the state of movies?', I'm going to say mostly chases and pie fights. By 1915, when D. W. Griffith makes *Birth of a Nation*, now I'm saying that this is a mature storytelling medium that has enormous power to shape the debates within our culture."⁹ Jenkins and many other critics in the growing field of game studies are trying to identify and cultivate a similar trend in videogames. In my previous book, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, I too made such a gesture, arguing for a comparative criticism of videogames that would connect them with so-called high art—poetry, literature, and film in particular.¹⁰

But the growth of videogames as a legitimate medium requires more than just comparisons to other media. Jenkins's casual comment might inspire the incorrect belief that time is a sufficient cure for the relative immaturity of videogames. But creative progress on the part of the development community and critical progress on the part of the academic and journalistic community require a deeper knowledge of the way videogames work—precisely how they do whatever it is we would have them do to count as expressive cultural artifacts.

This book is an analysis of the way videogames mount arguments and influence players. Drawing on the 2,500-year history of rhetoric, the study of persuasive expression, I offer a general approach to how rhetoric functions uniquely in software in general and videogames in particular. In classical antiquity, rhetoric was understood as the art of oratory. Since then, some fields

have adopted a more general understanding of rhetoric; for example, media studies now often covers visual rhetoric, the art of using imagery and visual representation persuasively, in order to understand the function of rhetoric in photography and film. Following these traditions, this book suggests that videogames open a new domain for persuasion, thanks to their core representational mode, procedurality.

I call this new form *procedural rhetoric*, the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures. This type of persuasion is tied to the core affordances of the computer: computers run processes, they execute calculations and rule-based symbolic manipulations. But I want to suggest that videogames, unlike some forms of computational persuasion, have unique persuasive powers. While “ordinary” software like word processors and photo editing applications are often used to create expressive artifacts, those completed artifacts do not usually rely on the computer in order to bear meaning. Videogames are computational artifacts that have cultural meaning *as* computational artifacts. Moreover, they are a popular form of computational artifact; perhaps the most prevalent form of expressive computation. Videogames are thus a particularly relevant medium for computational persuasion and expression.

Among computer software, I want to suggest that videogames have a unique persuasive power. Recent movements in the videogame industry, most notably the so-called *Serious Games* movement, which I discuss below, have sought to create videogames to support existing social and cultural positions. But videogames are capable of much more. In addition to becoming instrumental tools for institutional goals, videogames can also disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change. I believe that this power is not equivalent to the *content* of videogames, as the serious games community claims. Rather, this power lies in the very way videogames mount claims through procedural rhetorics. Thus, all kinds of videogames, from mass-market commercial products to obscure art objects, possess the power to mount equally meaningful expression. From this vantage point, in the following chapters I interrogate three domains in which videogame persuasion has already taken form and still has great promise: politics, advertising, and learning.

In the domain of politics, I look at politics and public policy, first discussing the ways ideology functions in videogames. I then examine the way

rule-based systems expose what George Lakoff has called “frames” for political discourse. Unlike verbal discourse, which relies on deeply ingrained metaphors that most people take for granted, videogames deploy more abstract representations about the way the world does or should function. I trace the function of these frames in political games, art games, and commercial games. Next, I explore the field of officially endorsed political games, investigating the role of games in public policy and political campaign discourse.

In the domain of advertising, I first argue for a new era in advertising, one that abandons the trend toward “associative” marketing, the attempt to manufacture needs in consumers by suggesting affinities between aspirations and brands. Instead, I resuscitate and revise “demonstrative” advertising, the attempt to correlate advertising messages with the actual features and functions of goods and services. I explore and chart many varieties of advertising in games, from branded games to in-game product placement, suggesting that games which articulate the function of a product or service deploy the most productive procedural rhetorics.

In the domain of learning, I first critique the state of current educational practice, in particular the tendency to teach either specific knowledge divorced from context or abstract principles divorced from specific knowledge. Next, I look at how games address values and aspirations, including an interrogation of consumption, corporate training, and morality. I argue that videogames’ usefulness comes not from a capacity to transfer social or workplace skills, but rather from their capacity to give consumers and workers a means to critique business, social, and moral principles. Finally, I explore so-called *exergames*, videogames that encourage physical activity in their players, arguing that the most sophisticated examples of these games attempt to translate the rhetoric of the personal trainer without simply reproducing the figure of the trainer.

The research that produced this book is twofold. On the one hand, I am an academic videogame researcher; I play games, research their histories and influences, and record my subsequent claims about their meaning. On the other hand, I am a videogame designer; I make games designed to have an impact in the three domains that are the subject of this book. The videogames studio I cofounded, Persuasive Games, shares its title with this book, and I intend this work to reflect both theoretical and game design goals. A small subset of the examples I discuss in the book were created at my studio, and I

select them not for self-promotion but because they directly address the topic at hand, a direct product of my attempt both to theorize and to practice the principles of procedural rhetoric. While I do not offer direct advice for game designers in these pages, I hope this book will prove useful for designers, critics, and players of videogames alike.

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