

Beyond Serious Games: the Next Generation of Cultural Artifacts

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Abstract. Beyond quizzes, cold simulations, and educational content placed inside non-meaningful games, serious games are evolving and becoming a more mature class of artefacts.

1 Introduction

Serious games are experiencing a new generation of artefacts, what in this paper is called “the second wave”, which is the symptom of an evolution and the result of a general improved understanding about how games themselves work. In order to analyse these changes and deconstruct them, this paper starts with a consideration about the definitions of what a game is.

2 About Definitions

Almost every game scholar has their own definition of what a game is. Every single one is fine, but they often fail in describing as a game something that the public and the critic regards as such. Being the game a social object often negotiated by the players, a definition of games should act like a loose guide rather than a prescriptive definition of what a game is and what it is not. Therefore this paper suggests the following definition:

A game is a system capable to generate emotions through agency in a ritual space.

The word system comes directly from Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s definition¹. The idea of “system” is central because it implies the game designer has defined mechanics from which the content of a game can emerge. It is capable to generate emotions which are the main reason we play. These emotions are generated or evoked by the interaction with the system, the *agency*.

The idea that emotions come indirectly from the player exploring the system comes from Jesse Schell² and from Will Wright’s definition of a game as *possibility space*³

¹ “A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that result in a quantifiable outcome.” – Katie Salen, Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (The MIT Press, 2004)

² Jesse Schell, *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses* (CRC Press, 2008)

³ “So it’s time to reconsider games, to recognize what’s different about them and how they benefit - not denigrate - culture. Consider, for instance, their “possibility space”: games usually start at a well-defined state (the setup in chess, for instance) and end when a specific state is reached (the king is checkmated). Players navigate this possibility space by their choices and actions; every player’s path is unique.” – Will Wright, “Dream Machine”,

the player explores and give sense to. All of this happens in a ritual space. This idea is the very same of Huizinga's *magic circle*⁴, and it's the negotiated space (physical or imaginary) where the rules of the game apply: if the players doesn't acknowledge the ritual space, no game can really exist for them. Now, game is a structured activity, for it needs a system, a negotiation and a ritual space. It can produce play (Zimmerman, 2003), though.

3 The Problem with “Serious” Games

Even if the term *serious game* has been used since 1975⁵ and at least since 2002⁶ has been referred to digital games, it could lead to misinterpretations of what a game is. Bernard De Koven⁷ has stated that playful is the path to happiness. Play is something that enables positive emotions. A structured game has also a great power as a learning machine. Raph Koster⁸ analyses how games, by enabling and improving the dopamine processes in our brain, are the perfect way to learn. While playfulness can evoke positive emotions, games are great learning systems. That's not a dichotomy, of course, but two aspects of a whole artefact. And that's why the term “serious” game fall short: when considered as an artefact, a game – being a learning machine – is inherently serious.

3.1 Where Serious Games Fall Short

What we have learned to call “serious games” sometimes take the form of quizzes you need to solve in order to make a story progress. These have questionable educational value, because often rely on sciolism rather than trying actually teach something throughout the game itself. In other examples, the educational content is breaking the rhythm of the game which is designed without any educational purposes in mind. This has been called by Ian Bogost⁹ the “Mary Poppins effect”, because like in the popular movie it's like adding a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down. But they lack of continuity and that's not how games work as learning machines.

published on *Wired*, 14/04/2006 – <http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/14.04/wright.html>

4 “All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.” – Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (The Beacon Press, 1955)

5 “We are concerned with serious games in the sense that these games have an explicit and carefully thought-out educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement.” – Clark C. Abt, *Serious Games* (University Press of America, 2002 – first ed. 1975)

6 Ben Sawyer, David Rejeski, *Serious Games: Improving Public Policy Through Game-based Learning and Simulation* (Woodrow Wilson, International Center for Scholars, 2002)

7 Bernard De Koven, *A Playful Path* (Lulu, 2014)

8 Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (Paraglyph Press, 2010)

9 Ian Bogost, “Persuasive Games”, presentation held at the UX Week 2013 (<http://vimeo.com/74943170>)

Then there are simulations: they often lack any real playfulness, resulting in something non-emotional we cannot relate to. These kind of simulations are a great example of how not play-centred systems miss something. When people play good simulation games (e.g., flight simulators) it is not in place of the real life experience. They are looking for sensations and emotions. One good example of introducing the real power of games in a simulation environment is *Relive*¹⁰: built to teach people how to correctly perform a CPR manoeuvre, its sci-fi setting and storyline, along with credible characters and a very strong game direction, moves away from the simulation and proposes an emotional and enjoyable game. *Relive* is just one example of the new wave of serious games. These games, rather than proposing themselves as educational, choose to play in the same field of traditional video games, albeit largely in the independent niche. They focus on their playful content, but they're still able to send powerful messages and teach complex systems in a very interesting way.

4 The New Generation

The game which best represent this new wave is *Papers, Please*¹¹ winner of two 2014 Games for Change Awards (Most Innovative & Best Gameplay Awards¹²) as well as of the Seumas McNally Grand Prize and the Excellence in Design at the 2014 Independent Games Festival¹³. In the game, the player takes the role of the border agent in a fictional totalitarian country. Day after day, they must decide if the arriving people can be let in or not, while the documents to be controlled grow in number and complexity as the government implement stricter immigration rules. Though the fictional setting, *Papers, Please* shows the players how immigration systems work, how government choose to control people entering a country and even how work conditions and wages can deeply influence the humanity of people. *Papers, Please* present a nuanced commentary about immigration, politics and also democracy, while retaining its nature of game.

5 Conclusions

Papers, Please looks like a tipping point. It's a commercial product, sold on platforms like Steam and due to be released on PSVita; its success sits on top of a lot of games using the power of game mechanics to teach, make people think and comment about every kind of topic. The second wave of serious games is mainly born out of the independent game community, as the result of a democratisation of game development, due to the diffusion of simple game-making tools and the liberalisation of digital distribution platforms¹⁴. The use of game development as an expressive form made by people who are not necessarily game developers could lead to a better understanding of how games work and to novel approaches to serious games. At the Games for Change Festival 2014, developer Paolo Pedercini¹⁵ pointed out the

¹⁰ StudioEvil, *Relive*, in development (<http://relivegame.com>)

¹¹ Lucas Pope, *Papers, Please*, 2013 (<http://papersplea.se>)

¹² (<http://gamesforchange.org/festival/gameplay/papers-please-2/>)

¹³ (<http://www.igf.com/02finalists.html>)

¹⁴ Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*, Seven Stories Press, 2012

¹⁵ Paolo Pedercini, "Making Games in a Fucked Up World", presentation held at the Games for Change Festival 2014 (<http://www.molleindustria.org/blog/making-games-in-a-fucked-up->

necessity of a turning point for serious games, rather than focusing on making educational games: what will happen if we enable more people expressing themselves through games?

The next step of games for impact doesn't lie in some technological advancement but rather, in helping people to engage with the practice of game design.¹⁶

Therefore, the second wave of serious games are games which don't consider themselves "serious" but instead implement a coherent system design to enhance messages without forgetting the basic rules of games, like the emotional link with the player, because the term is not to be considered as opposite of fun. In "fun" lies the learning machine and every message we want to deliver through it should be designed accordingly.

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¹⁶ *ibid.*