

**A Response to *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games***

Bogost begins with the anecdote of a 1975 game called *Tenure* and its portrayal of the complex social, political, and personal factors that go into being a high school teacher to introduce the concept of procedural rhetoric, simply defined as the practice of using processes persuasively (Bogost, Page 3). Procedure is further defined as the rules of the system, a series of sequential actions that determine how things work. Smaller actions create larger actions which according to *Hamlet on the Holodeck* author Janet Murray “means writing the rules by which the text appears as well as writing the texts themselves (Bogost, Page 10). In terms of game writing, I think this means taking into account both the literal content of the game (characters, cutscenes, levels, set pieces, etc.) and how the game can be interacted with. Gameplay doesn’t exist in its own world separate from the narrative, gameplay is a tool to convey the narrative.

Murray cites an early natural language processing (NLP) program called *Eliza* to illustrate her point on procedural expression (Bogost, Page 10). For illustrative purposes the example works, but I take issue with “expression” in reference to this particular program. The description makes *Eliza* sound like a 1960’s version of *Cleverbot*, but *Eliza* was meant to be a virtual therapist whose job is to empathize with the patient, not express itself. I could do an in-depth critique on how well I think *Eliza* does that job based on her responses, but this example works as a proof of concept. As Bogost states, “these are expressive agents, meant to clarify, explore, or comment on human processes in the same vein as poetry, literature and film ... these computer programs use processes for expression rather than utility (Bogost, Page 11).

Bogost becomes a bit more technical in next section, speaking of “game engines, frameworks, and other common groupings of procedural tropes as commensurate with forms of literary or artistic

expression, such as the sonnet, the short story, or the feature film” (Bogost, Page 14). This means that there are certain rules that can be broken, but are typically followed, by most works in an artistic medium such as rhyme schemes in poetry or mise-en-scène in theatre/film. The large variety of different types of games can make this a bit harder to spot, but games within the same genre will often share certain tropes in the user interface, controls, gameplay, or other areas.

The subject of rhetoric finally appears, which I define along the lines of persuasion. There is a point to be made and rhetoric is used to convince the audience of that point. As Bogost describes, it “should begin with an introduction, then continue with a description or narration of events, followed by proof and evidence and the probabilities that such evidence is sound” (Bogost, Page 17). In a narrative sense, rhetoric would be used to convince the audience to care about what’s going on with the characters or plot.

Visual rhetoric in regards to the persuasive power of images is introduced and is concluded to have evocative power over its verbal or written counterparts. The reason for this I think is that words have to be translated by your brain in some way, they have a logical appeal, as opposed to images which are more reliant on feeling than thinking. Simply looking at a sunset doesn’t produce any logical reasoning to think that it’s beautiful, but the almost subconscious feeling comes through all the same. The following section on digital rhetoric read more like a somewhat redundant combination of visual and verbal/written rhetoric. Apart from the greater likelihood of death of the author from the anonymity, I think there was a bit too much overlap to justify classifying it as a separate entity.

Procedural rhetoric is returned to as “a new and promising way to make claims about how things work” (Bogost, Page 29). In the “learn by doing” sense, I find this a fascinating argumentative strategy because it relies on creating the conditions that necessitate an action that illustrates the point, making the audience enact that action, then thinking about that action to come to their own conclusion

that may or may not align with the original point. It sounds like a high risk, high reward strategy resulting in either a level of understanding through lived experience that surpasses every other rhetorical technique, or the point becoming completely lost on the audience. The amount of agency required from the audience makes me doubtful that procedural rhetoric would draw in very many people looking to learn about serious issues, however, since a base level of interest would be required to learn actively rather than passively through reading or video. Without proper incentive or interest, people will trend toward the path of least resistance, and edutainment already elicits kneejerk avoidance from most players. But people actively seek out narratives and thrive on engagement, so I can see procedural rhetoric being used to effectively understand a deeper theme, a character struggle, or the intricacies of certain plot points.

Surprisingly, a distinction is made between procedural rhetoric and interactivity in which interactivity isn't necessarily required for procedural rhetoric to be effective and interactivity in and of itself doesn't make procedural rhetoric. "Mere ability to move a joystick or click on a mouse is not sufficient cause for agency ... rather, such environments must be meaningfully responsive to user input (Bogost, Page 42). This rings true for choices that crop up in experiences that don't actually communicate anything to the player. It's the façade of substance under the guise of interactivity that becomes meaningless by definition. The cyclic process outlined by Chris Crawford about listening, thinking, and speaking as a metaphor for interactivity does a lot toward quantifying its failings in circumstances in which the player feels it lacking (Bogost, Page 44).

Bogost spends the rest of the chapter detailing games pushing for social and political activism that strikes me as a little out of touch with the average gamer. While there is certainly a place for games that spread awareness or push an agenda, these games aren't representative of the larger industry which is a bit disappointing. These games likely would be used in a classroom setting, but I can't imagine

very many people outside of that demographic actively seeking most of the games Bogost has highlighted here.

On the whole, Bogost can be a bit longwinded and redundant in this more than sixty page chapter, but I think the concept of persuasive rhetoric comes through when that is indeed the focus. A meticulously edited or abridged version with an emphasis on concision would do wonders to get Bogost's point across without the excessive bloat found in the original passage. It's like finding a needle of insight in a haystack of fluff and restated points, which would be an interesting, if tedious, meta game to play using procedural rhetoric.

Bogost, I. (2010). *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.