

Chapter 11

Persuasive Games as Social Action Agents: Challenges and Implications in Learning and Society

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ABSTRACT

Persuasive games are an interdisciplinary area covering a range of fields. This article examines persuasive games through current trends in research as potential agents of social action. The implications of persuasive games for learning are analyzed through education and communication theories, suggesting that persuasive techniques are of primary importance and that procedures and ethos connect learners to experiences. The article first provides a historical overview of persuasive games, highlighting key background and influences. It then defines persuasive games through learning and communication theories, and discusses the implications of persuasive games as social action agents in research, policy, and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in persuasive games and social computing offer the potential for significant innovation in the field of games in education. Since 2003, when the first widely recognized persuasive game, *September 12th* (Newsgaming.com, 2003), demonstrated how video games could be designed to provide opportunities for interactive social commentary, hundreds of persuasive games have emerged that demonstrate the immersive power of constructed reality that can impact social issues in the real world. This has strong implications

for research, policy, and practice in education and industry.

Persuasive games take advantage of this immersive power by building on the framework provided by learning theorists, game studies (design and practice), and a theoretical foundation offered by the field of communication. Persuasive games are a viable way to take some of the key challenges that currently exist when incorporating digital games in education (Bogost, 2007; Evans, 2011), such as how to connect what is on the screen to real life or how to offer inbuilt opportunities for reflection. Similarly, advances in the technology applicable to

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persuasive games herald considerable benefits for the learner. Evans (2011) suggests that persuasive games offers, among other benefits, improved connections among social communication, collaboration, and knowledge exchange; expanded user awareness of social issues through discovery; and enhanced decision-making abilities based on affective learning opportunities. However, in order to realize these and other benefits, consideration needs to be given to the qualities and characteristics of the persuasive spectrum that could be useful to the construction of persuasive games.

This article examines the implications of persuasive games for learning, suggesting that persuasive techniques such as procedures and ethos are of primary importance to connecting learners to experiences. These processes may or may not necessitate the use of persuasive technology. The article first provides a historical overview of persuasive games, highlighting key background and influences. It then defines persuasive games through learning and communication theories, and discusses implications of persuasive games as social action agents in research, policy, and practice. Because *social action* is a term with multiple meanings, throughout this article the term is used to describe games with specific instances of taking into account the actions and reactions of individuals (or agents).

BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES

Persuasive games, games aimed at changing attitude or behavior, have been studied in various contexts with other definitions over the past forty years. Predating the invention of the computer, humans have used play and games for teaching necessary skills and socialization for millennia (Huizinga, 1955; Abt, 1970). Games explicitly created to change attitudes and behavior date back to 1790, when British publishers of the *New Game of Human Life* advised parents to play the board game with their children and “request their

attention to a few moral and judicious observations explanatory of each character as they proceed & contrast the happiness of a virtuous and well spent life with the fatal consequences arriving from vicious & immoral pursuits” (Lepore, 2007 para. 3).

In 1843 a board game released in the US called *Mansion of Happiness* instructed players to make good and moral decisions to gain the seat of happiness. Moreover, Milton Bradley created the *Checkered Game of Life*, in 1860 with the intention “to forcibly impress upon the minds of youth the great moral principles of virtue and vice.” While a commercial success that helped launch Bradley’s board game business, there is no evidence that it had any moral affect on the minds of children (Lepore, 2007 para. 3).

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a surge of multiplayer simulations. Given credibility by the Rand Foundation, which developed a number of persuasive games for use in the Cold and Vietnam wars, most of these were intended for education, training, and exploring alternative courses of action (Abt, 1970) with some persuasive purposes. For example, sociologists at Johns Hopkins developed *The Life Career Game*, *The Family Game*, *The Representative Democracy Game*, *The Community Response Game* and *The Consumer Game* with at the goal of the player learning the necessity to defer gratification through persuasion techniques (Avedon & Sutton-Smith, 1971).

Persuasive games today are an established part of video game landscapes. They have attracted the attention of the media, academics, and funding agencies such as the MacArthur Foundation (MacArthur Foundation, 2012). Websites, both academic and commercial, feature persuasive games such as Ben Sawyer’s Serious Games Initiatives website which has a repository of information about serious games (including persuasive games) and has served as a news source since 2002. In 2008 serious game creators and scholars Mary Flanagan and Helen Nessenbaum launched www.valuesatplay.org to harness the power of video games in the service of humanistic principles.

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