Chapter 93
The Persuasive Language of Action:
Interaction in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Besides the visual splendor pervasive in the current generation of digital video games, especially those where players roam simulated landscapes and imaginary worlds, few efforts have looked at the resources available to embed human meaning into a game's experience. From the art of persuasion to the mechanics of meaning-making in digital video games and table-top role playing games, this chapter investigates the changes and new opportunities available that can extend our understanding of digital rhetoric. Starting with a breakdown of the role of choice, workable models from psychology and the untapped body of knowledge from table-top role playing games are shown to allow game designers to enrich their products with a deeper human experience.

INTRODUCTION

We've seen tremendous technological advances in the visual capabilities of video games. Many available digital products present an almost photo-realistic environment for us to play in. But where does the human experience stand, the sensation that we are interacting with a world as natural and meaningful as our own? Even digital role playing video games known as Massively Multi-player Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGS), where the game play has a strong social aspect, still do not fully connect with our human needs to make meaningful choices. According to Aristotle (1984), "What makes a person a sophist is not his abilities but his choices." In current research in the area of digital story telling the player choices and the management of choice outcomes has become the de-facto means by which it is assumed a more meaningful experience can be generated (Riedl & Bulitko, 2013). The reasoning behind this concept is that choice empowers us and gives us more control over the artificial environment. Meaningful decision making can only take place when the structure or seeds for a decision have been well crafted. An assumption in this design

is that the fact a choice is available is what makes an experience meaningful. Instead it is better to reformulate the idea of choice and look at the nature of a choice or more specifically the impetus or setup of a choice. For example a choice, or what to do next, is more important when we are the witness to an accident than when we are faced with figuring out what kind of meal to order at a restaurant. We could think of the planning and design of meaningful situations as a form of suggesting possible choice-bearing scenarios. With this assumption in mind the article will mainly focus on the packaging and nature of the signals that pre-empt choices in digital games and give examples of how these signals can be enhanced.

One form of gameplay that accomplishes this goal of allowing players to give a shape and meaning to their choices is called Table-Top Role Play Gaming or Table Top RPGs. This type of non-digital real-life gameplay brings together small groups of players and is known for its complex interaction and storytelling (Van Velsen et al., 2009). The overall approach of the paper is to see how choice generation mechanisms work in table-top RPGs and see how suitable they are for digital video games. It is perhaps an overstatement to define table-top role-playing as a technological achievement; however, the adoption of probability modeling and a long history of rigorous testing and verification have almost given this form of game-play scientific status. Using the results from table-top studies mapped to current methods of interaction in digital games, we can extend our understanding of digital rhetoric. We can then go beyond the traditionally written and spoken forms of rhetoric, which then allows us to describe a more generic model of narrative interaction that forms a potential grounding for procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2008; Treanor et al., 2012). Before we can investigate any extensions to rhetoric and see how they apply to both digital video games and table-top RPGs, we need to establish how we define digital rhetoric.

Grounding in Digital Rhetoric

With a discussion on digital rhetoric we inevitably arrive at the question of what this term means or what the definition is. Amongst the many existing descriptions and definitions a categorization by Losh (Losh, 2012) stands out, since it acknowledges the wide variety of contexts and purposes of digital rhetoric. Her taxonomy includes two useful definitions:

1. The emerging scholarly discipline concerned with the rhetorical interpretation of computer-generated media as objects of study.
2. Mathematical theories of communication from the field of information science, many of which attempt to quantify the amount of uncertainty in a given linguistic exchange or the likely paths through which messages travel.

These definitions attempt to unpack the complexities involved in digital forms of media that require involved forms of computation to communicate a meaningful message or experience. When we speak of digital forms of media that involve large amounts of computation we mean those digital media where a simulated imaginary environment, complete with artificial characters and narrative, is presented to us through a high fidelity graphical representation. These forms of media are often called digital role playing games.

In this article we go beyond the technical complexities needed to visualize the natural environments in which stories can take place and we will focus instead on the human interaction and narrative aspects those systems afford. More specifically we will try to answer Losh's follow-up question to her categorical inventory of digital rhetoric: "How do we understand forms of invisible labor, and how knowledge is embodied, situated, and co-created?" To answer this question we turn

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