

Chapter 14

The Play of Persuasion: Why “Serious” Isn’t the Opposite of Fun

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ABSTRACT

Game designer Nick Fortugno’s keynote speech at the Meaningful Play conference talked about the conundrum of whether serious games can or even should be fun. Fortugno looks back at historical works of popular culture that exerted transformative effects on society. He examines three current persuasive games and offers his thoughts on what it will take for a game to achieve societal transformation.

Before I begin, let me make some preliminary points. First of all, this talk is about games that aim to persuade. That’s what I happen to be interested in and what I’ll be exploring today. The talk is specifically focused on a category of serious games designed to pass a message on to the user. The second thing you’ll notice is that “serious” in the title is in quotes. I only do that because I am trying to be clever. I do sit in the camp of people who dislike the term “serious games” for reasons you’ll see in a moment. But given that the other industries I work in are also misnamed “casual games” which an average player plays for an equal amount as a hardcore game, and “big games” because the first game that was made in the field had the word “big” in the title—I’m not

overly bothered by the fact that the serious genre is labeled incorrectly.

I’m co-founder of Rebel Monkey, based in New York. We’re working on a casual MMO, more about which will be revealed in early 2009. I’ve been a game designer for several years. My most famous piece of work is Diner Dash. It’s a totally entertainment based game; in fact most of my work has been in non-serious games. In Diner Dash, you wait tables. It’s a time management game. But I have also worked on serious games, notably Ayiti: The Cost of Life, a serious game I designed at GameLab in which you manage a family of Haitians and attempt to get their collective level of education up as you struggle against the conditions of poverty in Haiti. The

point of the game is to teach a lesson about how education differs in a developing country from in the United States.

But I also teach game design courses and this talk was inspired by my class. I teach a class at Parsons' called Game Design 1, the purpose of which is to introduce students to the basic ideas of game design. It's a studio class where students make board games and card games. This semester I went through a typical lesson that I use in my class and it had an interesting result. To understand where I am going with this, you should know that Parsons has a new program called PETLAB, a lab for game design and game development. Its purpose is tied closely to games for change. Its mission is to explore games that are capable of making social change.

In Game Design 1, the very first lesson in the very first class is to have the students generate a list of games. We use that list of games to try to derive a definition of games that we can use throughout the semester. This fall I asked the class to name some games. We came up with a list (Scrabble, Mario Brothers, God of War, Poker, Tag, Midnight Club, Halo, Legend of Zelda, Pac-Mac, Football, Shadow of the Colossus, Ikaruga, Persona 3, Double Dragon, etc.) and, as usual, it was varied and the games represented a large spectrum. I like to let the brainstorming go on for a while to generate as big and diverse a list as possible so that we can go on to identify aspects that are elemental and essential. When the list is large enough, I ask, what do these games have in common? Just think about it for a second, using the list above. And over the years that I've taught, I've found (just like anyone who has taught for some time) that the answers tend to gravitate around certain wells, and I can predict that certain responses are going to emerge. Every game on the list has rules, goals, and players; a game is a system that has objectives players try to reach; there are constraints on achieving those objectives that form the rules of the game: there's agency in the game. Often students will mention

challenge or competition. Here too the goal is to generate lots of ideas.

But there's an obvious commonality that nobody ever gets at first, something that takes some prodding to elicit. Eventually, after enough prodding, the class says, "FUN!!!" The presumption is that all games attempt to be fun. This is what happens normally. But this year when I asked that question—what's that one more obvious thing, and the answer came "fun" I then asked the question: Do games have to be fun? About a third of the class said no. That's never happened to me before. It was a bit of a shock to me, as someone who comes to games originally and primarily from an entertainment perspective, the idea that you would start a class in games and say that games don't have to be fun. The class argued about it for about 20 minutes before I had them move on. This exchange tells me something about the direction games are moving.

Do games need to be fun? In traditional game design, this is a ridiculous question. Fun is a deep principle of traditional game design. When I work as a game designer, fun is the barometer of success in development. You'll be sitting around the room with a bunch of designers. You'll have made a prototype, you'll look at the prototype, and the question is: is it fun? If the answer is no, you go back to the drawing board. So the idea that a game doesn't have to be fun is unsettling to traditional game designers. I think it is part of the reason there is resistance in traditional game design to serious games in general. Once you lose the fun barometer, as a designer you're floating out in the middle of nowhere.

The "games don't have to be fun" perspective in the classroom came particularly from students who were interested in and being trained in serious games. When they thought about fun, they thought about entertainment, which they considered frivolous. Games about serious issues shouldn't be frivolous, by their assessment, so they should be instead something else. They had a deep resistance to using the word FUN. The other words they came

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