

Games with an Agenda: Entertainment for Consciousness Building

Paulo V. W. Radtke

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Informática – PPGIa
Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná – PUCPR
Rua Imaculada Conceição, 1155- CEP 80215-901
Curitiba – PR – Brasil

Abstract

Videogames have been long debated for their supposed negative influence, especially on teenagers. However, non-governmental organizations have found video games a powerful ally to involve people on their cause. This paper discusses the anti-advergame, first surveying a selection of available titles and then discussing their strategies.

Resumo

Jogos eletrônicos tem sido alvo constante de debates por sua suposta influência negativa, especialmente em adolescentes. Entretanto, organizações não-governamentais têm encontrado em jogos eletrônicos um aliado poderoso para envolver as pessoas em suas causas. Este artigo discute o *anti-advergame*, primeiramente revisando títulos disponíveis para em seguida discutir suas estratégias.

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Authors' contact:
paulo.radtke@pucpr.br

1. Introduction

Traditional medium formats have been frequently targeted as means to promote ideas and brands (advertisement). The later has found its way to games since the earlier days, with **Pepsi Invaders** being one of the very first advergames, or the *Thompson Twins Adventure* game for the *ZX Spectrum* on the B side of a vinyl record. But games that promote ideas have been untapped for a longer time.

A more recent trend in the gaming industry is to use games to promote ideas [Bogost 2007a]. This is done in two different streams. The more well known is the anti-advergame, which subverts the advergame mechanics to demote a brand for its wrong doings. The second stream focuses in more general social, economics or ecological aspects. Although the first stream involves a direct campaign against a brand, the term anti-advergame is often used to describe both streams.

To further discuss this particular game genre, this paper first presents in Section 2 a brief survey on

games that promote ideas through their game play. Section 3 compares these games to a traditional medium approach, in order to understand how ideas can be better incorporated into games. Finally, the last section presents conclusions on the subject that shall guide future works.

2. Games Survey

This section introduces 9 games that perform the role of a cause's advocate. Ranging from action to puzzle games, each of them provides a different approach on anti-advergaming. These approaches are then discussed in the next section.

2.1 9/11 Survivor¹

An *Unreal Tournament 2* mod, **9/11 Survivor** puts the player in the role of a survivor of the fateful plane crashes at the *World Trade Center* in New York during the late summer of 2001. The main goal is to simply leave the building before it collapses. As with real people who were part in the real life events, survival is not only a matter of skill. Spawning points on floors above the crash point leaves the player with a difficult decision: either die engulfed in flames, or jump out of a window.

Whereas production values are simple, the mod successfully recreates the 9/11 atmosphere, including NPCs that act accordingly to the environment. Which is a point that led to criticism, as people often complain that the game offends the memory of 9/11 victims. But the author's target was to create interest around those events, letting people experience the situation and think over it. In this sense, the game succeeds and delivers a clear message to players.

2.1 City Rain²

Developed by *Mother Gaia Studio*, a Brazilian student team, and winner of the *Microsoft Imagine Cup*, **City Rain** is easily described as a crossover between *Tetris* and *Sim City*. City pieces fall from the sky and the player has to place them over a map grid, aiming to balance the city structures placement in order to keep the city properly organized. A system female voice

¹ <http://www.selectparks.net/911survivor/>

² <http://cityra.in/>

guide the player on the city needs, which replaces the typical *Sim City* counselors.

The most notable aspect in **City Rain** is that it's actually a fun and challenging puzzle game, which also happens to deliver a positive and clear message. The message is also contemporary, and reflects current issues on city planning and life style against life quality on larger cities. Those issues are easy to relate to, helping the game's message to spread.

2.3 Super Chick Sisters³

Funded by *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals* – PETA, the game revolves around a campaign against the popular North American fast-food chain, *Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC)*. The campaign, called *Kentucky Fried Cruelty*, goes against the practices used to growing chickens to KFC's restaurants, and has already won a milestone battle in Canada.

The game plays similar to *Super Mario Brothers*, featuring two little chicken sisters, Nugget and Chickette (plumber caps included). They quest to defeat Colonel Sanders and rescue an active vocal PETA supporter in real life, Pamela Anderson (which the player can unlock after beating the game). Game play mechanics mimics the traditional *Super Mario* platform style: jump over enemies, break blocks, complete the stage in time, and the chickens will even grow bigger with power ups.

Game designer Karen Nielsen exercised caution to make the game as fun to play as serious as the message behind it [Lavigne 2007]. However, other anti-advergame authors also criticized the game. Ian Bogost questioned in [2007b] why the game uses an indirect approach to give away its message, instead of putting the player in control of a KFC farm to experience the actual practices. Whereas this idea works on other games, scalding chickens to death may not be a thrilling experience to most people, thus the indirect approach may work better in this case.

2.4 McDonald's Videogame⁴

A simulation game that puts the player in control of a *McDonald's* business manager that has to supply and control restaurants. The main argument here is that *McDonald's* is practicing unethical business practices in order to get a profit from \$1 sandwiches. The game allows players to bribe inspectors, control pasture, destroy a rainforest, exploit 3rd world farmers, manage beef slaughter and aggressively promote the brand through advertisements.

The game's strongest point is that players are practically required to use unethical methods to have

some profit, complementing the rhetoric that condemns *McDonalds*. It is simple for players to relate what they see on the game to what they can see on actual McDonald's restaurants. Also, the game's website is designed to lure the players as if it was an actual *McDonald's* website. An illusion destroyed later by the satirical and often acid comments on the corporation before the player starts the game.

2.5 Disaffected!⁵

Any streamlined facility is well known for its degraded working conditions, pressure for results and the resulting stress disorders. Developed by *Persuasive Games*, **Disaffected!** portrays *Fedex Kinko* copy facilities and how poor human resources management practices affect workers and degrade service quality.

The player takes the role of an invisible hand, suggesting workers which labor to do. This in turn influences their mood. Based on that, the worker may do the job, may do it lousily or may leave that aside. One interesting tweak is workers that may move around orders so that the player has to find them first to get them processed.

2.6 Fatworld⁶

Another *Persuasive Games* production, **Fatworld** puts the player to explore the relation between nutrition, politics and economics. The player can control an avatar that has to get not only a balanced diet for him self, but as well run a balanced restaurant for the community. Thus, the challenge is to find out not only a good menu for the restaurant, but to find the best options regarding cost, which is directly related to food subsidies and taxes.

The player can also play politics, and change these subsidies and taxes to verify how they affect the game, only to question why the food policies are not aligned with those tried out during the game. The clear goal is to criticize US government agencies for giving up pressuring from producers lobbies, instead of pursuing a policy that priory the unaware citizen. Here, the political view comes into play, placing the game against a much larger corporation, the US government and its economical system.

2.7 ICED – I Can End Deportation⁷

ICED is a *The Sims*-like game with a twist: the player takes the role of an immigrant to the US. Not only illegal immigrants are portrayed. The game also depicts legal immigrants, a foreigner student and a green card bearer worker. During the game, all of them

³ <http://www.kentuckyfriedcruelty.com/>

⁴ <http://www.mcvideogame.com/>

⁵ <http://www.persuasivegames.com/games/game.aspx?game=disaffected>

⁶ <http://www.fatworld.org/>

⁷ <http://www.icedgame.com/>

are in constant danger of deportation. The game's main goal is to demonstrate that immigrants are not subjected to the same human rights as American citizens.

Players have to avoid *Immigration and Customs Enforcement* (ICE) agents, which have the power to determine what is right or wrong, and to deport an immigrant. When stopped by ICE agents, the player has to answer them correctly and hope they make the right decisions to avoid deportation.

The game has been proposed as an electronic tutorial about human rights, following the New York State standards for Social Studies and English Language Arts.

2.8 Darfur is Dying⁸

Inspired by the Darfur crisis in Africa, the game puts the player in control of a civilian trying to survive the armed conflict. Among the goals the player must attain are searching for water, hiding from militia to avoid being captured or searching for medical assistance on a refugee camp.

Divided in two main parts, the game cleverly uses two different game styles to recreate the actual situation. To search for water, the player must run through a deserted field and hide from passing vehicles. The more fast-paced nature in this situation recreates the rush of moving around in a conflict zone. The second game style plays like a traditional simulation game, where the player uses his available time to best take care of him self on the refugee camp.

2.8 The Tibet Game⁹

Employing a game play mechanic inspired by the classic puzzle-solving game *Myst*, the **Tibet Game**'s message is a cultural one. Instead of directly criticizing the Chinese occupation in Tibet, it promotes cultural and spiritual values banned by the Chinese government.

The goal is to reach the Nirvana and. In order to do so, the player must build a good karma. This is achieved through good actions, freeing itself from material possession and by promoting Buddhism, by giving away Buddha pictures to people needing enlightenment (which are now illegal in Tibet). All while avoiding Chinese government supporters and visiting places relevant to Buddhists.

3. Discussion

Ahn and Dabbish discussed in [2008] some aspects that will attract players to a game. Among their

conclusions was that one primitive reason is the player's wish to be entertained. Meaning that, besides passing a message, anti-advergaming have to be fun and challenging games. Otherwise, they will fail on passing the message, as the basic requirement is that people have to actually play it to get a message.

Whereas the anti-advergame is a recent trend, other mediums have previously tried similar approaches. The most notable is the subvertising movement, which twists a brand's well known advertisement campaign into a negative critic, hoping to lead to a consumer's perspective change. Binaya assessed in her doctoral thesis [2005] the subvertising approach, and surprisingly found out that the defensive posture on test subjects made actual changes difficult, if not impossible. More alarmingly, the majority of subjects neutral to particular brands not only had no negative reactions, but got more familiar to the brands and had some positive reactions.

The final conclusion in Binaya's thesis is that if people are not given real motivation and clear messages, subvertising itself will not attain its goals. The same point is valid for anti-advergaming, although actual researches have to demonstrate it statistically. In this sense, games with positive messages, such as **City Rain** and **The Tibet Game**, are more likely to reach their goals.

As for games that go against well known brands, more work is necessary to convince people before their preconceived ideas get in the way [Binaya 2005], and the message must be clear and easy to assimilate. For instance, **Disaffected!** allows the player to efficiently manage human resources, which invalidates its own premise – to demote *Kinko* for its poor management practices. On the other hand, the **McDonald's Videogame** will let the player experience some profit only if the player uses immoral business practices, which reinforces the game's original statement [Jared 2008].

Ultimately, the final aspect that usually undermines those games efforts is their limited distribution and, ironically, lack of advertisement, so they can reach a wider user range. Besides gaming industry insiders and researchers, games trying to deliver a message are unknown to the mainstream market that is not actively related to the message those games try to deliver. Making these games fun is a mandatory step, but making them reach the masses is just as important. Lessons learned from internet viral marketing campaigns should be taken into account in order to raise interest in these games.

One successful viral campaign that changed a brand was set in motion through a video by the Neistat brothers at **ipodsdirtysecret.com**. The campaign easily gained momentum through a very effective message: the iPod's irreplaceable batteries wouldn't last more than 18 months. The campaign was enough to warn

⁸ <http://www.darfurisdying.com/>

⁹ <http://www.tibetgame.com/>

potential consumers and unite current users to file a class-action lawsuit, which in turn prompted Apple to reduce the cost to replace batteries. A game might be a very different media, but unless people flock to its website to play it, any discussions that may lead to changes are unlikely to happen.

4. Conclusion

Whereas there is the lack of a landmark game in this specific genre, building consciousness through games is a feasible task. Current efforts have reached to the level where they can be seen as legitimate games, even if their production values are very distant from commercial mainstream games. Besides being legitimate games, they also carry a message, whether the message has to be improved or not. The key issue right now is to make these games find their way to gaming enthusiasts, so these games can make the difference they were meant for.

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