Games Combatting the

Dictatorship of Entertainment

A Study of the Newsgaming Phenomenon

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1   INTRODUCTION

Many of the digital games of our time take place in a fictional world. When analysing them, one might see some traces of the game designers' world view. Still, the average player might not reflect much upon it. He will probably rather try to peel the "distracting" fictional layer off to understand the underlying game mechanics to get ahead in the game (Koster 2005:162). Some games, however, are made primarily as comments to what is going on in our world today, and the semiotic layer suddenly becomes quite important to get the ideological message of the game. These are a part of the group 'serious games', and often go by the name 'newsgames'. This term was first introduced by game designer Gonzalo Frasca when releasing the game *September 12th* in 2003, and is straightforward meant to define "videogames based on news events" (Newsgaming.com). Other terms used that are up the same alley are 'political games', 'ideological games' and 'persuasive games', though these terms are a bit broader.

Are there any characteristics that newsgames often have in common? Do such games demand to be played and experienced by the public in another way than the games that exist just for entertainment purpose? How are these games received by the public - considering that the public generally has been raised learning that games equal fun? I want to look into the background and the debate around newsgaming in general, and take a closer look at the game *September 12th* and its context, to try to find answers to the questions I have raised here.

2   BACKGROUND

2.1   The Visionary

The father of political games, a game genre quite close to the newsgaming genre, is by many considered to be Chris Crawford (Leupold 2004). He created a number of important games in the 1980s - *Balance of Power* about the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union being the most successful one. He was an enthusiastic part of the game industry in several years until he dramatically announced his departure in a lecture

called *The Dragon Speech* in 1993. He explains in his essay based on this speech, "I Had a Dream", that it was the reception of his world simulation game *Balance of the Planet* (1990) that drove him to the conclusion of leaving the business:

> "I wanted to create a game that honestly addressed environmental policy problems, something to show just how powerfully a computer could present a complex issue. I did just that... Yet when I released it to the world, the reaction of industry, press, and consumers was unenthusiastic." (Crawford 1997)

One of the reviewers noted that "it is the closest thing to art to be sold as computer entertainment...but it is just not fun...if the game is not fun, it simply wouldn't be right to endorse it..." (ibid). So the reviewer aknowledged that the game was some kind of art - and games as an art form had in fact been what Crawford was pursuing while designing. "I dreamed of the day when computer games would be a viable medium of artistic expression - an art form […] given power through the effectiveness of interactivity" Crawford declared (ibid). Still, it seems the game industry was not ready to broaden the idea of what games were or could be at that point. Crawford claimed that the reason for their unwillingness to be visionary, was their greediness. It is not unlikely that the hunger for more money got the industry stuck in one track for a while, only improving existing types of games instead of taking the risk of exploring new genres. And for quite some time games had to be *fun* according to the industry.

A well-known game designer today, Ian Bogost, discusses *Balance of the Planet* in his most recent book *Persuasive Games*, and he points out what he means is lacking in the game (2007a:40-42). Being a designer within the serious games genre, fun in the most traditional sense of the word probably is not what he is missing. I will discuss the characteristics of newsgames later on, factoring Bogost's view of what a good serious game needs into the equation. Though up until a few years ago (and maybe still today), most people have been viewing games as pure entertainment, and seriousness has not been given much room at all. And when it comes to making games out of real and tragic events, such games have not only been written off as not being fun, but they are often called tasteless and insensitive, and have been causing a lot of debate…

2.2   Browser Games

With the Internet and World Wide Web becoming increasingly popular during the 90's, the distribution of games was no longer limited to what the game industry endorsed. Also, the knowledge of how to make games became more accessible through the Web. In addition, it was possible to "mod", i.e. make modifications, to existing game engines. Suddenly, "anyone" could create and put simple games online for everyone to play for free – quickly and with few resources. Most of these games were what we call browser games based on Java or Flash, and their popularity relied, and relies, heavily on word-of-mouth, spreading virally, rather than on any game reviewers. And when game designing is for "everybody" and something to do for the fun of it rather than for the money, you get more experimental games than the industry typically would produce…

2.3   Games As Therapy

After the attacks on World Trade Center September 11th in 2001, games inspired by this event were numerous. In the game community Newgrounds.com, a lot of independent game developers made games where you could beat or shoot the terrorist attack scapegoat, Osama bin Laden. Jill Walker Rettberg wrote about these games in her Doctoral thesis *Fiction and Interaction: How Clicking a Mouse Can Make You Part of a Fictional World*, pointing out how in most of these games the point is not to win or to loose – the outcome is actually often predetermined (Walker 2003). The game might be so easy that you could beat Bin Laden blindfolded – like in the fighting game *Bad dudes vs. Bin Laden*, or Bin Laden could just keep popping up no matter how many times you shoot him – like in *Bin Laden Liquors*. These are games with very simplistic gameplay. The semiotics is clearly what they are about – the fact that it is *Bin Laden* you are allowed to punch or shoot. After all, most of America was ready for revenge after the attacks, and these games became popular as "therapy" for the powerless people of the US. The feedback to the developer of *Bad Dudes vs. Bin Laden* in the reviews on Newgrounds.com would typically look like this: "This was great, your a good man, being able to beat that terrorist's ass was great, thank you." ("User comments", *Bad Dudes vs. Bin Laden*).

If such games actually work according to the "catharsis hypothesis" is a question I will not attempt to answer. And the blood thirst and revenge these games mirrored actually did not draw that much attention. However, games with quite another view on this war on terror also came to the surface after the attacks, and the reactions were strong.

The American people were understandably quite sensitive to certain issues after September 11th. *New York Defender* was one of the games that got some strong reactions. It is a game quite similar to Missile Command but where in New York Defender the semiotic layer is changed. What you see is the New York skyline including the World Trade Center. Planes keep flying straight towards the twin towers, and the player is supposed to shoot down the planes before they hit the buildings.

The initial instructions to the game translated from French is "Use your mouse to combat the feeling of powerlessness." When playing the game, quite soon you realize that you in fact are powerless. The planes just keep coming and fly faster and faster into the towers. When both towers are collapsed, the game is over, and you are given a high score. Judging by reactions in various forums, some found the game to be rather disturbing, and felt it was unnecessary to voluntarily relive the attacks over and over again. Some were provoked by the implication of the game, that no matter how good you became at defending the towers, in the end you could not win – as if the war on terror was impossible to win. Others admitted that the game was fun and highly addictive. Even though they could see that it also was somewhat tasteless in the light of the recent disaster, they felt it was good to have a laugh in the middle of the tragedy (Metafilter.com and Ebaum's World - discussions about the game).

3   SEPTEMBER 12TH

3.1   Against Replayability

Gonzalo Frasca also made games after the tragic events in 2001. But in both *Kabul Kaboom!* (2001) and *September 12*[th] (2003) he consciously avoided making the games

addictive. "Gameplay, if good, becomes addictive and makes everything else invisible." he claims in his blogpost "Against Replayability" published at Ludology.org right after he released his first game (Frasca 2001a). He continues:

> "It is not supposed to be fun. I don't care if people don't replay the game over and over. In fact, just by breaking replayability I hope to alienate the gaming experience and trigger some kind of critical response." (ibid.)

September 12th is indeed not a game to play over and over, even though you might want to try out some different tactics to understand the game mechanics. Frasca describes the game this way:

> "The game models a Middle Eastern town showcasing mostly civilians and some terrorists. The player controls a crosshair with which it is possible to launch missiles. It is almost impossible to kill the terrorists without generating "collateral damage". Every time that a civilian dies, others will mourn him or her and, suddenly, become terrorists." (Frasca 2003)

After playing for some minutes, the number of terrorists will be out of control. The game rules tell us that the more you bomb, the more terrorists you get – hence more violence can not be the answer in the war on terror (or anywhere for that matter). A simple rule that would work just perfectly if we all lived by it, avoiding violence and war altogether…

3.2   Simplicity As A Strength

The world is not that easy, however, and when it comes to the game September 12th, the simplicity is by many criticized as a weakness. "[W]hat an impressively mounted attack on US policy; moreover, what an imaginative, well researched, and well argued point." game designer Greg Costikyan sarcastically comments when dissecting the game on his blog (2003). Being in New York at the time of the attacks, his feelings and critique towards the game is, maybe understandably, rather strong. Others have reacted by suggesting alterations to the game to get a more realistic view:

> "What you would need for the simulation to argue anything coherent is a linked world showing an area being targeted by terrorists. because then you would see that "doing nothing" still results in terror (or else you would at least be making a coherent argument that it does not)" (Blog comment, Gamegirladvance.com)

Some have asked if the game would look different when it comes to the peaceful terrorists just running around, if Western tourists or embassies were added to the equation. But in my opinion these reactions actually shows how the simplicity of the game also can be considered a strength – making people reflect upon how the world *really* works.

When I played the game I wondered why no-one was mourning when the terrorists got killed. They too probably have families who love them? What do the "normal" citizens of this town think of the terrorists? Are they as outraged as the Western world is by their actions? Or can they to some degree relate to the terrorists' ideology? And if they do relate to it – how come? All these questions came to me when reflecting around this *one* little design decision Frasca and his team had done – that killed terrorists would not make the civilians mourn.

3.3   Simulation – A Limitation

The reason why the game got so many strong reactions, might have been the game's somewhat provoking introduction: "This is not a game. You can't win and you can't lose. This is a simulation.". If it is a game or not is a question I will get into later. For now, I will however continue to call it a game – as the developer Frasca also does when he discusses it in various papers. But that it is a simulation is beyond doubt when looking at Salen and Zimmerman's definition.

Salen and Zimmerman define simulation as "a procedural representation of aspects of "reality"" in their book Rules of Play (2004:423). The procedurality emerges as a result of the players following the rules of the game. The rules make up a dynamic system, and this dynamic system is a representation of how an attack on a Middle Eastern town might work. That the simulation is supposed to represent *aspects of "reality"* informs us "that a

simulation cannot depict every aspect of something" (ibid). There are different degrees of simulations – and when making a simulation, one has to choose which aspects to take into the simulation, and which to leave out. "Reality" is set in quotation marks because a simulation actually does not even need a real world referent system. It could very well be my imaginative reality, or my opinion of what the reality is like.

Many have the impression that a simulation should be as close to the real thing as possible. This is obiviously not the case with September 12th. Some of the people debating this game reacted by rejecting the whole game because of its obvious limited model. Frasca asks if this might be because of what Sherry Turkle in her book *Life on the Screen* (1995) calls 'simulation denial', but I am not sure if this is the case. I understand the phenomenon Turkle describes as people who believe that simulations *never* can help us understand reality because they always will offer a limited model of the world. However, the ones that reacted by saying that this game was too simplistic and limited to be a simulation, will probably not reject *all* simluations because they are not the real thing. They reject *this one* because they think it is way too simplistic, and therefore should not be called a simulation according to their idea of what a simulation is.

They do have a point when saying that there are some aspects that are missing for us to be able to really believe that this simulation is the answer to the war on terror. But I guess this game is not made for us to play it, and then take the message it communicates as the truth without questioning. That would be what Sherry Turkle calls 'simulation resignation' (ibid). This simulation is clearly so simple that I guess no-one in their right mind would base their view on the war on terror based on this game alone. But it makes us reflect upon the world, and as discussed earlier in this paper, I think this is how the game teaches us something, if it provokes us or not.

3.4 Is It A Game?

The introduction sets the tone in this game. In addition to claiming that the game "is not a game", it describes the rules: "The rules are deadly simple. You can shoot. Or not. This is a simple model you can use to explore some aspects of the war on terror". When the

game begins, you are looking at a crowded Middle Eastern town from above, with a crosshair that you control aiming at some random people in the middle of the screen. There are mostly civilians in the town, but some recognizable terrorists stand out from the crowd. The setting is familiar to other games – you are driven to shoot at "the bad guys". You *can* choose not to shoot, but the game like interface drives you to action rather than watching the people just run around. And "the bad guys" you are aiming at will in this setting be the terrorists. You get this even though the introduction says nothing about the goal being this. It says nothing about the goal at all. In fact, if looking at the game isolated, there is no goal at all. But the title September 12th leads us directly to thinking of the attacks the day before, and in this context you definitely know who the enemies are. Your conscience will also probably tell you to not kill any civilians.

Salen and Zimmerman define games as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that result in a quantifiable outcome"(2004:80). In September 12th the conflict is as implied above framed by the context in which the game takes place. That the game designers exploit the knowledge the whole world has about the attacks and about terrorists, instead of explicitly instruct the players, does after my opinion not make September 12th less of a game.

Except for the "shoot or don't shoot" introduction, the rule system is there for you to discover. You will discover that the crosshair shoots missiles with a range that will hit more people than you might initially think. That when one missile is dropped, you have to wait about 10 seconds before you can drop another one – making you watch the civilians mourning the loss of their loved ones while waiting. And civilians near another hit civilian will mourn and become terrorists themselves. These are just some of the rules that are designed into the game. It seems, when deciding if September 12th is a game or not, the question is if the game results in a quantifiable outcome.

"The game […] has no end" the introduction in the game says. It can go on forever, it seems, though I have not actually tried that out. But so can the Sim games too, and they are considered to be games, because each player might set goals of their own within the

simulation. In the Sim games you often have some numbers to cling to, making it easier to see if you reach your goals. In September 12th there are no such "quantifiable outcome" – unless you count dead bodies yourself. "One thing I would have liked is a counter saying how many clean kills I had, how many terrorists I had killed, and how many kids." serious game designer Ben Sawyer argues in one of the debates (Blog comment, GameGirlAdvance.com). Now, you only get a *feeling* of how you are doing within the game by watching the amount of terrorists compared to the civilians. If such a counter was provided, maybe combined with a timer, Sawyer probably would have played several times to try different strategies and compete against himself. And this would not suit Frasca very well – being "against replayability", as earlier mentioned (Frasca 2001a).

When Frasca made his first newsgame *Kabul Kaboom!*, he explained his amitbions with the game in an e-mail to Jill Walker Rettberg, and as it seems to me, these amibitions were present when he made September 12th too: "my goal was to do some kind of absurd game, with no score, ways of winning or losing." (Frasca in e-mail correspondence about *Kabul Kaboom!*, Walker 2001). And September 12th is absurd as a game too. Frasca is playing with our expectations of what games are. Still, judging by my analysis, it *is* a game. I would have considered it a quite bad game, though, if the semiotic layer was not based on such a hot and important topic, surrounded by the political context in the real world.

4   THE FUN FACTOR

4.1   Are The Games Fun?

"All the semantic meanings of the game are secondary to the gameplay's primary ludologic structure." Lars Konzack claims when presenting his method for analysing computer games (2002). When it comes to newsgames, this is not necessarily a valid argument anymore. As I implied above, the semiotic layer and the context of the game is in large part what makes September 12th what it is. *Together with* the game mechanics, it

communicates its ideological message. Without the semiotic layer, all that would have been left would be some deliberately made bad gameplay.

When Raph Koster in his book *A Theory of Fun* talks about fun, he uses it in the sense "the act of mastering a problem mentally" (2005:90). In the game context, he then seems to equal "mastering a problem mentally" with finding underlying patterns within the game – patterns being the game mechanics. In the newsgame genre you will also want to explore the game mechanics. When you discover a new game rule, i.e. that civilians will mourn and become terrorists themselves if you kill a civilian, you can use this knowedge to try to avoid hitting any civilians in the future. Still, more reflection is needed to really enjoy the game. What does the rule I discovered mean in a larger context? Why did the designers make that exact rule? To make any sense of it, you would probably also have to recognize that the title of the game refers to a news event. All this reflection is also about mastering a problem in a way – putting pieces together both from the game mechanics, the semiotic layer of the game, and from what you know about the real world. When only discovering a game mechanic in itself, you get ahead in the game world. But when you place the game mechanic in a real world context – as you are encouraged to do in a newsgame, you might "get ahead" in the real world too. And when discovering the underlying meaning of a rule, or the underlying meaning of a game in total for that matter, I actually think you are having fun. It might not be the same kind of addictive fun as the ordinary computer game provides, though.

As head of the Italian game design collective, Molleindustria, Paolo Pedercini has designed a fair share of games with an agenda beyond pure entertainment. "Fun is never our main goal - or, at least, not the common concept of fun," he says (Ochalla 2007). Maybe the newsgame concept of fun can be compared with the kind of thrill you get when reading a well written editorial? When you understand all the metaphors the author uses, completely get the sarcastic remarks, and then strongly agree or disagree with its message. Newsgames often do get compared with editorial cartoons. But newsgames do have some properties that might make them even more effective than a flat cartoon

drawing… I will come back to this when talking about newsgame characteristics in general in chapter 6.

4.2   The Trouble With Fun

Games have traditionally been a leisure activity, made to entertain people. The newsgames are often based on tragic events, letting people play with a scenario related to the event in some way. Playing with something that has affected people in the real word in a bad way, is by many considered problematic. "The basic assumption is that if you are playing with something, you are not taking it seriously." Frasca explains on his blog (Frasca 2001b). Some people get furious with the very idea of there being a game about a certain event. They might claim that the game is distasteful – often without even having tried the game to see how the event is portrayed.

"We try to understand video games as a medium capable of a whole range of expressions beyond simply entertainment, from the point of view of criticism rather than distraction" game developer Bogost says in an interview with the New York Times (Sharkey 2007). And this criticism has become too much in some cases. When Molleindustria released the satirical game *Operation: Pedopriest* in 2007, it was soon censored by the Italian government after heavy pressure from the Vatican. In the game, your task is to protect the pedofile priests' actions from being discovered. As a criticism of the church's way of handling the extensive pedophiliac scandal, it was quite effective. Protecting the pedofile is not a task one as a player enjoy, and the absurdity of this role makes you see clearly the absurdity of how the catholic church handled the scandals.

Portraying a serious issue, the game developers still managed to put some humour into the game, making fun of the priests and their helpers. The Catholic church, however, did not find it particularly amusing being ridiculed by a game that diffused virally all over the world. Blaming it on the portrayal of sex with children on the web – which by law is forbidden in Italy, the game was not allowed to be hosted on Italian servers. This game's stylised, cartoonish representation of pedophilia could hardly be the real reason for the

Vatican's worries. The powerful satire of the game was probably considered quite harmful for the image of the church – mocking it in a whole other way than the other medias could do, and maybe even reaching another audience.

5 THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

A newsgame might reach another audience than a regular newspaper article does. In some ways, this is good because an important topic reaches more people. But it also has its downsides. A lot of newsgames are published on gaming sites, reaching gamers, not ordinary citizens more broadly. Considering that these gaming sites often are visited by a younger group of people, the reactions to the newsgames are often quite different from what their creators probably were hoping for.

The game *Airport Security* is "a critique of the absurdist changing practices in airport security", one of the creators, Ian Bogost, explains (Bogost 2006). Working as a security guard at an airport, you are supposed to make sure that rules concerning what the passengers are allowed to bring through the security gates, are followed. If you are not working at a high enough pace, the line will grow longer until it reaches a limit which means game over. The rules are changing fast, and absurd prohibitions like "No hats allowed" make the game highly relevant in times where we as passengers have to obey rules at airports that not always seem to make sense to us. But the reactions to the game at the gaming site Shockwave.com shows us how some might miss the point of the game:

> "ok i dont see why shirts shoes hats and pants would be a security risk....."

> "it stinx how the restrictions change so suddenly...i lost several times because the restrictions would change just as someone would go through the gate...grrr"
> (User reviews, *Airport Security* at Shockwave.com)

The last of these comments is from a frustrated guy that does everything right in the game, but still end up losing. The security rules changed just after he had let a passenger pass, so that the passenger still "beeped" when going through the gates even though he was cleared at first. This is another example of erroneous gameplay deliberately put into

the game to prove a point. Normally games are not supposed to behave like that when you have done everything right as a player. But in the newsgame it makes perfect sense because the message comes out even clearer: that the rules are changing so fast that it is impossible to keep track – and even the security guards are bound to make mistakes.

Most of the players of the game at Shockwave.com do not get this message however. All they see is a bad game. They are not used to these kind of games, and they might not have enough knowledge to see how the game fits into the larger context – the news media. As before mentioned, these games often relies on the player knowing something about the topic portrayed outside the game itself to make sense of the game. You *can* play the games just for fun without knowing anything about the background, but chances are you will have a gaming experience that is below average due to the bad gameplay. With the required contextual information, you will however see the irony of the game. You might even take your time to giggle over the message board in the background of the airport displaying messages such as: "The War Against Moisture", instead of focusing solely on doing your very best job as a security guard – a job that you are doomed to fail anyway.

That the player's contextual knowledge has such an impact on how he or she experiences the game, leads me to think that the physical context of the game, i.e. where it is published, might have a great deal to with the reception of the game. Bogost too has acknowledged this. In the blog he co-writes with Gonzalo Frasca, Water Cooler Games, he talks about the publishing deal his game design company Persuasive Games had with Shockwave: "Shockwave is still a gaming site, reaching gamers, not necessarily reaching ordinary citizens more broadly. And that's what news and editorial should do." (Bogost 2007b). But this statement came in the same blogpost as the announcement that Persuasive Games had gotten a publishing relationship with The New York Times. The newspaper would distribute their newsgames as editorial content in their online edition. Bogost was excited about the deal, because just like Chris Crawford, he wants more for the computer games as a medium than what we have seen so far:

> "I think it represents another important shift in videogames as a medium. This is news/editorial in videogame form, rather than videogames trying to make news fun." (ibid)

Just a couple of weeks later, CNN.com also got into the newsgaming business with a game created by Persuasive Games (Bogost 2007c). I do not know of other large media corporations that have similar arrangements. But I think it is evident that such deals are important both for general recognition of computer games as a medium capable of more than just entertaining people, and for reaching a broader audience able to fully understand the games.

6   NEWSGAME CHARACTERISTICS

After looking at several newsgames, I have discussed some of their characteristics without really having put emphasis on them as characteristics. This chapter is here to sum up what newsgames are about, beyond the definition "videogames based on news events" (Newsgaming.com).

Newsgames are supposed to be about topics of current interest. This often means that there is no time to polish the gameplay, make excellent graphics and so on. In addition to this, the games are mainly available for free, which means that their developers often have small budgets to produce the games. And the games are of course influenced by this, by being less sophisticated than they perhaps could have been.

Then again, the point of these games is rarely to get the players sucked in to a marvellous game world to play for hours. The games are generally of the casual game type where you easily understand how to play, and then get the point of the game quickly. And considering that the point of the game often partly is communicated through erroneous gameplay, the games are less addictive than the traditional casual game like for instance Tetris.

And making the games less replayable is actually a goal for most designers of newsgames. As the designer you do not necessarily want the players to try to master the game by playing over and over. You want them to get some distance from the normal way to play a game where the goal is to win. The players should rather try to use what they learn about the gameplay together with the semiotic layer and together with their knowledge about the event in the real world, to understand *the message* of the game.

And if understanding the game's message is fun or not is a matter of how you define fun. But it is probably not the same kind of fun as the flow you might feel when you get ahead in a traditional computer game fully concentrated on mastering the tasks you are given. Either way, humour is often present in these games even though they are a part of the serious games genre, and often portray serious and even tragic events.

The introduction to these games are often an important part of the game by setting the tone. In addition to instructing the player and explaining the player's role in the game, it is often quite ironic, and might reveal the game designers view on the topic even before the game starts. In *Operation: Pedopriest* you learn the goal of the game in part through the fictional letter you as a "silencer" receive from the pope, signed *Benedictus XVI.*

> "Dear Cardinal,
> Once again the clergy is in the midst of controversies. It seems that our common and well established sexual habits, the so called "abuses of minors", have once again thrust us into the media spot light. The Church's priority is to shut down these rumours and prevent priests from being captured […]"
> (Introduction, *Operation: Pedopriest*)

This introduction also shows how you are put in the role of a bad guy in the game. Most people will not be comfortable in a position where you are supposed to protect priests that abuse minors. It appears that you are placed in an uncomfortable role in many of the newsgames, actually. In *September 12*[th] you are facing a Middle Eastern town, trying to defeat the terrorists while not hurting any civilians. Your mission is in many people's eyes heroic. Still, you will end up killing a good portion of civilians due to the way the game is designed. This role is not one most of us would like to live with either. Being the

security guard on an airport as you are in *Airport Security* might not be that bad a role, but most of us do not enjoy the security check where our fate is in the hands of the guards.

Maybe placing the player in an awkward position in the game helps the designers in communicating the game's message? The main point of *Airport Security* is according to Bogost "to demonstrate the absurdity of these arbitrary changes that appear to have nothing to do with actual security and everything to do with what people call security theater" (Sharkey 2007). However, I came to another "realization" when playing the game too. As mentioned earlier it is possible to do everything right playing the security guard in *Airport Security*. But then the rules for what is permitted and prohibited changes just before a passenger goes through the gate, and as a player I get annoyed. But I also see clearly that the rules come from above, and that the security is just doing its job. This makes me realize that I as a *passenger* should not get angry with the security guard when I have to leave my water bottle and breakfast when trying to pass through the gates in real life.

I might already have known the fact that the security guards are just doing their job. But the way I experienced this through "working" as a security guard myself, with the new rules bombarding me from above at a heavy pace, made me realize it in another, and maybe more memorable way. My sudden understanding of the security guards work, might be due to what Ian Bogost calls *procedural rhetoric*.

> "Games communicate differently than other media; they not only deliver messages, but also simulate experiences. While often thought to be just a leisure activity, games can also become rhetorical tools."
> (PersuasiveGames.com, website for the game design company of Ian Bogost)

Through a newsgame you have the possibility to state your opinion on how things work by letting the player "experience" it. Bogost defines procedural rhetoric as "the practice of using processes persuasively". He further explains that the arguments of the game "are made through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models"

(Bogost 2007a:28-29). But in order to make the game communicate its message, it is important that the processes going on inside the game become apparent to the player. And this is where Bogost feels there is something missing in the previously mentioned game *Balance of the Planet* by Chris Crawford. The game has a large possibility space, but the feedback system for the player's actions does not make it clear what decisions give what effect. If the player can not discover the processes within the game by playing it, the game fails to communicate anything (ibid:40-44).

The reviewer of the game *Balance of the Planet* complained about the lack of fun in the game. Without communication in a game, I guess there will be no fun in any sense of the word – not even in the broader understanding of fun I presented in chapter 4.1 'Are The Games Fun?'. And without communicating anything, there definitely will not be any persuasion.

7   ARE WE PERSUADED?

The game developers of newsgames obviously have opinions on the matters they portray in their games. And these often come shining through when playing, as they should. It is games about how the world works - according to the game developers. In the FAQ page of Newsgaming.com (the team behind September 12th), they do not hide that fact:

> **Are your games biased?**
> Of course they are. We do not believe in objective journalism. We prefer games that encourage critical thinking, even if the player disagrees with our games' ideas.
> (FAQ page, Newsgaming.com)

Most certainly, when you have an opinion on a matter, and you go to the extent of making a game about it, you would like others to share that view on the matter after playing. Persuading people that already have taken the opposite stand on an issue, might be a bit amibitious, however. The ones who have yet to make up their minds about a matter might be easier to lead. But either way, the newsgame pushes us into thinking critical about both the message it conveys, and about the matter it portrays. And if

someone were to swallow the message of the game without any further thought, the passionate debates that often follow such games would be there to correct the image.

The power of simulation should not be underestimated. Even though it might be difficult to persuade someone with a strong belief or opinion, I still believe there are many who could be stimulated to think or behave differently through playing games. When experiencing something, it is easier stuck in your memory than when you just read about someone's experience for example. When playing a game, you have to make choices, take action – and for you it will be a vivid experience even though it is not an experience from real life. This kind of simulation experience might help when making choices in real life. I have already mentioned one example (though it is a bit banal) - about how I understood that airport security guards get the rules from higher in the system by playing *Airport Security*. Lately I have also been playing *The McDonald's Video Game*, designed by Molleindustria to show how running the fast food chain is impossible without tearing down rain forests and bribe politicians and so on. I doubt I will eat another burger without thinking of the possibility of the cows being infected with hormones, fed with industrial waste, and start to ponder upon how many trees in the rain forest were killed to feed the restaurant customers. It will be the game that makes me hesitate the next time I feel the urge for a burger, rather then the various newspaper articles I have read on the matter before.

Still, the newsgames mentioned in this paper are some of the best newsgames out there. And many more exist, but often fail to engage us. Ian Bogost sees it this way:

> On the one hand, most rapidly developed, highly topical newsgames are skin-deep. They serve mostly as curiosities, rather than procedural interpretations of the news. On the other hand, deeper interpretations require more time, perhaps too much time.
> (Bogost 2006)

What Bogost is saying is that the time aspect forces the developers to keep a somewhat shallow approach to the news topic – to ensure that the game will still be relevant when published. But games about more lasting issues like global warming should not have to

suffer that same fate. I suspect that this comes down to commercial potential of such games. And whether the game industry is willing to take a chance.

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