



ILL. 2: In *The McDonald's Video Game* the player controls the production of fast-food (by permission from Paolo Pedercini).

Game activism: The McDonald's Video Game

A large quantity of political computer games are found on the Internet in an activist environment determined to revolt against the established attitudes of the prevailing system – a kind of net activism. Visiting these websites one will find games that challenge the meaning of the War on Terror, work, homosexuality etc. According to one of the genre's leading designers, Paolo Pedercini from Italian Molleindustria, a common presumption amongst political game designers is that games are able to reach an audience which is otherwise unreceptive to political discussions, and that games are well suited to stage and question a world perceived as a system. As game theorist Ted Friedman states, it is much easier to create Marx's *Das Kapital* as a game than as a movie (Dugan).

The real political (and aesthetic) dimension does not, however, lie in the ability to create an insight into particular, supposed mechanisms of society. Rather, it lies in the will to express an attitude through a game as a performative action – when the player him/herself starts emitting attitudes. Pedercini and Molleindustrias' own *McDonald's Video Game* is a good example.

McDonald's is a 'tycoon game'. Tycoon games are not games that can be won but are rather simulations of systems. Players construct buildings, zoos, roller coasters, railroads and so forth, and the object is essentially to construct and accumulate as much wealth as possible by auditing and maintaining the system. In *McDonald's*, you build and sell burgers. To maintain a satisfactory production of burgers it is necessary to cut rainforest, exhaust land, add industrial waste to cow fodder, bribe environmental organisations and nutritionists, and so forth. Consequently, the game is a rather explicit exclamation of the factors that govern the global fast food industry – a kind of enlightening of the player as to 'what things are really like'. At the same time, and much more importantly in understanding its political/aesthetic qualities, the game has a built-in critique of the computer game itself.

According to Pedercini, Will Wright, the designer behind the well-known game *SimCity*, claims that when designing games he does not consider their political dimensions. Everything is created to entertain the player. This is of course surprising because *SimCity* seems extremely overt in its political evaluation of the player's actions – you cannot nationalise all property, certain ways of doing things pay off and others do not etc. Pedercini calls the game industry "the dictatorship of entertainment" and argues that games are never entertainment alone. Games are always political because they deal with cultural and ideological issues. The object of the *McDonald's* game is thus not so much to entertain as it is to de-mystify "the political neutrality of the entertainment products ('it's only a game'), by making games whose main point is not to keep the player hours and hours in front of a screen" (Dugan).

As Pedercini suggests, the implication of the dictatorship of entertainment even reaches beyond emitting a dominant ideology disguised as entertainment. The entertainment of the user may be regarded as a dictatorship in itself. The player of a computer game needs to be active – but only within the magic circle of the game. After all, playing a computer game is a very mute activity. So, through entertainment software, the consumer is pacified and silenced – not as a player, but as a citizen. Pedercini breaks this silence by becoming writerly – that is, by becoming a producer and not just a consumer of a game. He creates a game that in its presentation of a game is

almost a caricature of a game. By doing this, he escapes his destiny as a player subordinated to ‘the dictatorship of entertainment’.

When playing *McDonald’s*, what fascinates is not only the exposure of the fast-food industry, it is also the humour and the parody of a game. Through laughter, the player finds a community with the game and becomes involved in the process of being transformed into a producer, subverting the relationship between emitter and receiver, game and player, market and consumer.

In short, Pedercini plays with the computer game as a personal expression and this little game undermines what Rancière would call “the distribution of the sensible.” The game opens for experiences that are not otherwise allowed. Through a game loaded with a personal perspective, the player deliberately manifests him/herself and demonstrates that he or she still has at least the possibility of imagining a destiny beyond “the dictatorship of entertainment”.

Game mods: Max Payne Cheats Only

Another kind of writerly gaming is found within the field of software art. One could call them ‘art games’. ‘Game’ is perhaps not the best term to use, because a large proportion of these ‘art games’ are modifications of games that in many cases are not even playable.

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ILL. 3: The web page where the game SOD can be downloaded (by permission from Jodi).