The Mechanic Is Not the (Whole) Message: Procedural Rhetoric Meets Framing in *Train* & *Playing History 2*

Sebastian Deterding
Digital Creativity Labs
The Ron Cooke Hub, University of York
Heslington, York YO10 5GE
Phone: +44 (0)1904 32-5459
sebastian@codingconduct.cc

Keywords
Procedural rhetoric, visual framing, frame analysis, meta-rules

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper engages in a comparative analysis of the games *Train* (Brathwaite, 2009) and *Playing History 2: Slave Trade* (Serious Games Interactive, 2015) to explore how the same procedural rhetoric can result in radically divergent audience responses. Combining game analysis, designer interviews, and player discourses, it argues that audio-visual and media frames have a strong impact on how a game mechanical message is perceived and evaluated. Furthermore, it unpacks how games, like other media, participate in the production and circulation of meanings through meta-media and meta-discourses (reviews, screenshots) as much as first-hand engagement with the game.

A well-established theory of persuasive and serious games, procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007) posits that videogames mount arguments by procedurally modeling a real-world system: as players interact with the game, the experienced mismatch of the game's and their own mental model of the real-world system creates a "simulation fever" (ibid.) or cognitive dissonance. In making sense out of this mismatch, players change their attitudes and beliefs. However, procedural rhetoric remains quite unclear how game design might steer this sense-making process in desired directions. Highly divergent responses to games like *JFK: Reloaded* (Traffic Software, 2004) show that the mechanic or procedural model of the game is certainly not the whole message, or sufficiently predetermines how its message is received (Bogost, 2007). In response, this paper compares two serious games with the same procedural rhetoric but heavily divergent audience responses to identify features that affect meaning-making of procedural rhetoric, *Train* and *Playing History 2: Slave Trade*.

Train is part of Brenda Brathwaite's multi-award winning series of board games "The Mechanic is the Message" (2009), designed to "capture(.) and express(.) difficult experiences through the medium of a game." Tasking players to efficiently transport yellow game pieces from one end of the board to the other, *Train* reveals in a later part that players in so doing embody willing helpers transporting Jews into concentration camps during the Holocaust. Thus, the game makes players complicit, procedurally modeling how human beings can dehumanize each other by "just following rules."

Playing History 2: Slave Trade deploys the same procedural conceit: the player embodies a young steward on an 18th century slave trader ship, in one mini-game helping the captain to efficiently stack slaves in the belly of the ship, effectively emulating *Tetris* (Pajitnov and Pokjilko, 1984). In later parts of the game, the player learns about the suffering of slaves on slave ships, and can help them escape.

In this, both games rely on the "meta-rules" of play that free games from social and physical consequence and thus allow the exploration of alternative behaviors: after all, they are "just a game" (Logas 2011). Yet while *Train* predominantly received acclaim, *Playing History 2* was met by a public outcry across traditional and social media, eventually leading the developers to take the "Slave Tetris" section out of the game.

Combining a close formal analysis of the two games with a discourse analysis of media and audience responses recorded on news and social media sites, this paper argues that these divergent responses are due to a combination of divergent audio-visual frames (Parry, 2010) and activated social frames (Goffman, 1986; Chapman & Linderoth, 2015) in meta-media and meta-discourses: *Train* circulated in public discourse in the form of a careful photograph of the game board placed on a smashed glass window against a black background, signaling seriousness and unease. In addition, Brathwaite carefully framed *Train* as an art piece for adult audience, activating an art frame that allows for norm-breaching, uncomfortable engagements with serious subject matter. In contrast, *Playing History 2* travelled public discourse in the form of a single screenshot of the "Slave Tetris" level, designed in a child-friendly cartoon look, cutting away the internal critique of the modeled proceedings later in the game. By framing itself as a game for children, it activated a children's entertainment game frame, which clashed with the serious subject in the audience's perception.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bogost, I. Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames. MIT Press, Cambridge, London, 2007.

Brathwaite, B. 2009. "The Mechanic Is the Message." Available at https://mechanicmessage.wordpress.com/ (accessed Jan 29, 2016).

Chapman, A, and Linderoth, J. "Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games," in The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments, edited by Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley M.L. Brown. Routledge, London, 2015, pp. 137–153.

Goffman, E. Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience. Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1986.

Logas, H. L. "Meta-Rules and Complicity in Brenda Brathwaite's Train," in Proceedings of DiGRA 2011: Think Design Play (Hilversum, NL, 2011).

Parry, K. "A Visual Framing Analysis of British Press Photography during the 2006 Israel-Lebanon Conflict," in *Media, War & Conflict* vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 67–85.