



# The missing media The procedural rhetoric of computer games



Jens Seiffert<sup>a</sup>, Howard Nothhaft<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Leipzig, Germany

<sup>b</sup> Lund University, Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

The discussion about the implications of new or digital media focuses mainly on 'social' media. This reduction is a conceptual shortcoming. In order to fully understand how digital media impact on society and the communication landscape, our conceptualisation needs to include new entertainment media, especially computer games. Interactivity here might mean interaction with the AI (artificial intelligence) or human players or both, but the crucial difference lies in the fact that the interaction takes place in a 'world' created by the software. Despite the discussion about 'gamification' in marketing and a tradition of game studies in the humanities, there have been few attempts to treat computer games not only as trivial culture, but as a "persuasive device", as a way to shape public opinion. This article explores how the theory of procedural rhetoric, as outlined by Ian Bogost, enhances our understanding of this growing area.

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"Computer games are trivial, irrational and predominantly played by boys and young men. They are simplistic, patriarchal and militaristic, promoting obesity, violence and anti-social behaviour. Their narratives are paper-thin and puerile. They are not legitimate objects of study, lacking the richness of higher art forms. They are a frustrating waste of time, taking hours and hours to play. Players are hostile, brainwashed and obsessive. Games are ideologically loaded, and contribute nothing to public life." (Chesher & Costello, 2004, p. 5)

"When it comes to paying the bills, or helping your neighbor, or feeding children in India, playing Civilization isn't going to do any more good than playing any other game. But neither will reading The Brothers Karamazov or watching Kurosawa's Ran. And yet I am a firm believer that reading Dostoevsky and watching Kurosawa will enrich a person's life, and are valuable uses of time." (Magnuson, 2010)

## 1. Computer games: "Distraction at best, moral baseness at worst"

The first opening quote, by Chesher & Costello, critically sums up the attitude towards computer games probably prevailing among scholars and intellectuals 10 years ago – arguably, it is by no means rare today. Whenever computer games

\* Corresponding author at: Lunds Universitet Campus Helsingborg, Department for Strategic Communication (ISK), P.O. Box 882, SE-251 08 Helsingborg, Sweden. Tel.: +46 42 3 56509.

E-mail addresses: [seiffert@uni-leipzig.de](mailto:seiffert@uni-leipzig.de) (J. Seiffert), [howard.nothhaft@isk.lu.se](mailto:howard.nothhaft@isk.lu.se) (H. Nothhaft).

and computer game research are objects of public discussion, the context very likely is a young male who ran amok<sup>2</sup> and was known to be playing ‘killer games’ like *Counterstrike*, *Half-Life* or *Battlefield* (for a recent example cf. Carey, 2013).

There is a wealth of research about other effects computer gaming has on children and young adults beyond hostility, brainwash and obsession, of course. The effects on empathy or the connection of playing and various development parameters such as motor- and spatial skills or school performance, etc. have been researched (for a recent overview Prot, McDonald, Anderson, & Gentile, 2012). But physiological and psychological effects are not everything. As the second quote by game researcher Magnuson indicates, there also exist scholarly circles in which computer games are approached as cultural artefacts. Since the inauguration of the journal *Game Studies* in 2001, we can certainly speak of such a worldwide community, but it remains small. As late as 2007, researcher and game developer Ian Bogost pointed out that computer games “still struggle for acceptance as a cultural form.” (2010, p. vii) “Videogames are considered inconsequential”, Bogost diagnoses, “because they are perceived to serve no cultural or social function save distraction at best, moral baseness at worst.” (2010, p. viii).

The following article wants to show why computer games are not inconsequential. We argue that their seeming triviality makes computer games powerful persuasive devices, and that they should be considered the ‘missing media’ in public relations- and strategic communications-research, on a practical as well as on societal level. On the practical level, we argue that the failure of researchers and scholars to devote adequate attention to computer games is a missed chance for public relations-researchers. Computer games have been successfully employed for purposes that fall well within our field – *America’s Army* is the paradigm example – but next to no research has been carried out from a strategic communications perspective. With a view to the societal level, we argue that the casual dismissal of computer games as a force in society constitutes dangerous negligence. There is good reason to assume, for example, that computer games have played a substantial part in re-constituting military force as a viable policy option in the eyes of Western voters and taxpayers (Thomson, 2009). And, maybe most importantly, computer games may have shaped and continue to shape what coming generations of voters and citizens believe about and expect from democracy (preliminary results by Åkerström & Young, 2013, suggest this). Again, to our knowledge next to no research has been carried out here.

Our argumentation proceeds in five steps. In Part 2, we discuss why there has been reluctance, in scholarly circles, to intellectually engage with computer games. Our argument here is that computer games were, and still are, *trivialized* to a degree that is astonishing considering the economic importance of the game industry and the amount of time the average Westerner (and presumably the Easterner, too) spends playing. The trivialization is not very surprising, however, when viewed as the expression of the *trivialization of popular culture*. As we will try to show, public relations research has always been plagued with overestimating the importance of journalism and underestimating the power of popular culture as the transmission belt of societal change. But in the case of computer games, we argue, this neglect grows out of paradigmatic assumptions what ‘communication’ is.

In Part 3 and 4, we turn to games-related research in public relations and strategic communication. Part 3 is devoted to a review of the very rare work done in that area; Part 4 turns to theoretical conceptualisation. Drawing on Ian Bogost’s theory of procedural rhetoric, we argue that the persuasive power of computer games and their long-term effects on attitudes and expectations – as opposed to behaviour or behavioural disposition – is inadequately understood for the very reason that it is inadequately theorized. Computer games express ideas and influence ‘players’ in ways that are fundamentally different from the ways the spoken or written word or images or motion-pictures or narrations do with listeners, readers, viewers. In Part 5, we try to demonstrate, by means of the examples of the documentary game *Fort McMoney* and the turn-based strategy game *Civilization* (in its 5th instalment) that ‘procedural rhetoric’ explains the ways computer games presumably work on the minds of players. Part 6 places the discussion of computer games into the broader context of gamification, a concept that recently has attracted attention in marketing research (see Miller & Washington, 2013).

## 2. The trivialization of computer games and popular culture

According to industry forecasts (Nayak, 2013), the global computer game market, including mobile and tablet games, created 66 billion USD in revenues in 2013 – four times the revenues of the world’s music industry (Smirke, 2013). Revenues from entertainment software are expected to grow to 82 billion USD by 2017 (Nayak, 2013), almost reaching the global movie revenues, DVD and box-office combined, presently estimated at 94 billion USD and shrinking. In the U.S. alone, households spent 20.77 billion USD on computer games, associated hardware and accessories (cf. ESA, 2013) in 2013 – approximately twice the amount of Hollywood’s global box office earnings at the same time. The best-selling game of 2013, *Grand Theft Auto V*, published by Rockstar Games and available for PC, Xbox 360 and Playstation 3, sold 26.75 million units worldwide (VGChartz, 2014a). This one best selling game alone generated more revenue than Twitter. While Twitter reported 242

<sup>2</sup> There is evidence that playing violent games raises levels of aggressive behaviour, aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, and physiological arousal in the short-term (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007; Anderson et al., 2010) in both males and females and across cultures, although there are also some studies that found no effects (cf. Adachi & Willoughby, 2011, p. 259). Anderson et al. (2010, p. 152) summarize: “In general, the violent video game research mirrors findings from the violent TV and film research, with some evidence that the violent video game effects may be somewhat larger.” Recently, however, Adachi and Willoughby (2011) found indications that aggression after playing computer games might stem from in-game *competition* (i.e. *losing*), not the depiction or experience of violence in itself.

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