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Differentiating Serious, Persuasive, and Expressive Games

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Abstract

This article highlights the similarities and differences between “serious”, “persuasive” and “expressive” games. Since these categories rely on the developer’s intention and since this intention is not always clearly stated, I identify a series of textual and paratextual clues that might help the players in inferring the developer’s intention. To illustrate the idea that procedurality is not the only factor involved in the labelling of these games, I refer to many examples and conduct a *white-box* analysis of the game *A Conversation With Hugo*. I finally stress the importance of not falling into the essentialist trap when labelling these types of games.

Keywords: video game, categorization, serious games, persuasive games, expressive games

Résumé en français à la fin du texte

Introduction

The recent multiplication of games that are not primarily made to entertain raises questions for game scholars: how to handle such diversity in game production? How can we regroup these games into different subcategories? Labels such as “serious games”, “persuasive games” and “expressive games” were created by developers and scholars to label or differentiate these games. In this article, I will firstly provide an overview of how these types of games have been respectively defined. We will see that scholars consider the intention of the developers to be the main element that distinguishes them from one another. Since developers do not always provide clear indications about their intentions, I will argue that assigning a label to these types of games often involves imposing our own interpretation on them. Drawing from Umberto Eco’s (1991) theory on the limits of interpretation, I will identify a series of textual and paratextual elements that can help in inferring the developer’s intention. While Ian Bogost (2011) focuses on game procedures to characterize persuasive games, I will defend the ideas that many other elements can be involved when it comes to distinguishing serious, persuasive and expressive games. More precisely, I will posit the level of realism, the choice of topics, the ludic ethos, the level of transparency, the learning feedback, reflexive elements, traces of authorship, and the context of distribution as different interpretative keys that allow the players to formulate a hypothesis about the developer’s intention. To exemplify and discuss these ideas, I will refer to the particular case of *A Conversation With Hugo*; a game that I myself created to raise awareness on the negative impact of gender-based harassment. This example will allow me to show that procedurality is not the only aspect from which we can draw in order to differentiate serious, persuasive and expressive games. Finally, I will discuss the importance of labelling these types of games without falling into the essentialist trap.

Defining Serious Games

All games have serious implications, be it from the perspectives of game designers who make video games for a living, of gamers who spend a considerable amount of time playing, or of

game scholars who dedicate their research to this media form. It is also fair to say that all games involve learning something, even when it is only a set of rules. Most of games also provide the opportunity to enhance our motor skills and spatial perception, as well as our general curiosity, cognitive skills and mental maps (Koster in Michael and Chen, 2006: 25). According to Clark C. Abt (1970), games “are effective teaching and training devices”, because they allow the players to “assume realistic roles, face problems, formulate strategies, make decisions, and get fast feedback on the consequences of their actions” (cited in Michael and Chen, 2006: 26). For non-players, video games can, however, appear to be a trivial pastime and the expression “serious games” can sound like an oxymoron.

The expression “serious games” has, however, been used for more than four decades within the game industry jargon to define games “in which education (in its various forms) is the primary goal, rather than entertainment” (Michael and Chen, 2006: 23). The examples mentioned by Michael and Chen (2006) in their book *Serious Games* are flight simulators, as well as military, first responders, public policy and ethic training games. These types of serious games are often ordered by government agencies such as the US Department of Homeland Security or the US Army. Corporations also commission serious games for training or advertising purposes. Games that are involved in what we commonly call “e-learning” teach employees how to use specialized equipment or help them learn specific procedures. Other types of serious games teach particular topics (mathematics, logic, science, programming, reading, typing, language, music, politics, etc.) to students at different levels. Also known as “edutainment”, this type of serious game is most of the time marketed to educators or parents in order to be used in an educational context. The health industry also makes use of serious games to help patient exercise, prepare surgeons for delicate procedures, assist patients in their treatment or help them to manage their anxiety. Religious games that aim to inculcate religious doctrines and literature also fit in Michael and Chen’s category of serious games. According to these scholars, the fact that serious games’ primary goal is not entertainment does not mean that they cannot be amusing. In many cases, their educational and entertaining aspects “overlap” and take advantage of each other to reach their respective goals (2006: 17).

According to Ben Sawyer, co-founder of the *Serious Games Initiative*, the label “serious game” is “intended to reflect the purpose of the game” and the reason why it was created in the first place (cited in Michael and Chen, 2006: 23). Therefore, it does not have much to do with the style, the content or the design of the game. Similarly, Abt (1970) considers that serious games have “an explicit and carefully thought-out educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement” (cited in Michael and Chen, 2006: 21). Ian Bogost, for his part, describes serious games as those “crafted in the service of officials” like “education, government, health, military, corporate, first responders, science” (2007: 56). From all these perspectives, the category “serious games” relies on predetermined institutional goals and on the developer’s intention to teach, train, or inform, unlike game genres (action, adventure, shooter, racing, fighting, sport, strategy, role-playing, etc.) that are mostly based on gameplay and interactivity, that is to say on the actions that the players can accomplish, the challenges they have to face, as well as the limits and affordances of the program code (Arsenault, 2011).

In their book, Michael and Chen provide a wide definition of serious games that includes software using “the artistic medium of games to deliver a message, teach a lesson, or provide an experience” (2006: 23). A small section of their book is even devoted to artgames like *Velvet-Strike* (Schleiner, 2002), which expresses the creator’s opposition to the US-led war in Iraq by encouraging the players to spray anti-war graffiti on the walls. According to Michael and Chen, artgames communicate the vision of a single developer or a small team “trying to make a statement of its own” (2006: 225). They are apart from mass culture and made for non-commercial purposes. However, the rapid proliferation of this type of game –accelerated by the proliferation of independent game companies and the development of user-friendly game engines– encouraged game scholars such as Ian Bogost (2007) and Sébastien Genvo (2016) to create different labels in order to differentiate them from serious games.

Defining Persuasive Games

Since not all games with a primary function other than entertaining are instrumental tools for institutional goals, Bogost coined the expression “persuasive games” to qualify games that convey messages, draw arguments, convince players to adopt a specific point of view, change their beliefs about the world or influence their behaviours (2007: ix). He specifies that there are two models of persuasion: the classic model involves changing peoples’ opinions or influencing their actions in a teleological way, while the contemporary model only implies to “convey ideas effectively” without aiming towards a specific end (2007: 29). According to Bogost, persuasive games that fall under the category serious games persuade in a teleological way to support the worldview of an institution:

Educational games translate existing pedagogical goals into videogame form; government games translate existing political goals into videogame form; health games provide doctors and medical institutions with video game-based tools to accomplish their existing needs [etc.]. (2007: 57)

These institutional goals, however, do not cover the entire range of persuasive possibilities. This is why Bogost uses the expression “persuasive games” to include games that question the way things work, challenge social conventions and oppose the “fixed worldviews of institutions like governments or corporations” (2007: 57). From that perspective, a lot of serious games are persuasive, but not all persuasive games are serious.

For Bogost, the persuasive potential of games does not only rely on spoken words, written descriptions or images, but also on “procedural rhetoric”, that is to say on rules-based argumentation. In other words, these games achieve persuasion not only through semantics, texts or visual designs, but also through the program execution of commands that constraint the players’ actions: “This type of persuasion is tied to the core affordances of the computer: computers run processes, they execute calculations and rule-based symbolic manipulations” (2007: ix). In his book *Persuasive Games*, Bogost (2007) is most interested in games that use procedural rhetoric to achieve non-teleological persuasion and express political ideas, especially when they illustrate how a particular system works in the material world. Among the examples of persuasive games that he mentions feature 1- *Tooth Protectors* (1983), commissioned by *Johnson & Johnson* to stress the importance of brushing, flossing and mouth washing, without directing the players towards the corporation’s products, 2-

McDonald's Videogame (Molleindustria, 2006), that criticizes the restaurant's business practices and their environmental impact by asking the players to manage a franchise and forcing them to make difficult moral choices, 3- *Mansion Impossible* (Unknown), which encourages the players to invest money instead of keeping it in the bank, without teaching traditional knowledge about mortgages, property management, taxes, and government regulations, 3- *Tenure* (Gaede, 1975), which simulates the first year of a high school teacher and asks the players to make a series of decisions on his behalf, in order to argue that school politics and personal conflicts impact educational practices, 4- the election games *Howard Dean for Iowa* (Bogost and Frasca, 2003) and *Take Back Illinois* (Bogost, 2004), which familiarize the players with key campaign issues, as well as 6- the environmental video game prototype *Save the Whales* (20th Century Fox, 1984), which takes a stance against whale hunting by asking the players to fire projectiles at fishing nets. Bogost also mentions several games that make a political commentary about a war like 7- *Antiwargame* (Josh, 2001), which makes several statements about society in a post 9/11 world, in addition to arguing that business and military interests are two sides of the same coin, 8- *Kabul Kaboom* (Frasca, 2002), in which the players have to catch falling hamburgers while avoiding bombs to quickly realize that it is impossible to do both at the same time, as well as 9- *September 12* (Frasca, 2003), which illustrates that targeting terrorists with missiles lead to the killing of innocent victims and turn citizens into more terrorists. Unlike serious games, these games do not aim to provoke a specific reaction or comply with institutional objectives, but rather convey a political message through their programming code. However, to some extent, Bogost's examples of games commissioned by companies or by political organizations appear as an indirect means to achieving institutional goals (selling a product or winning votes) and could therefore be considered as serious games.

Defining Expressive Games

Most game scholars agree to say that video games are an expressive medium, in so far as they present a point of view, put the players in someone else's shoes and force them to become "practitioners" of this person's problems instead of passive observers (Bogost, 2011: 141). However, Sébastien Genvo (2016) recently coined the expression "expressive games" to qualify games that exploit this aspect of the medium more systematically. According to the French scholar, expressive games explore cultural, social, and psychological issues through

an individual's perspective, in order to foster empathy, encourage reflection, and raise questions, while entertaining. They confront the players to the difficulties, dilemmas, and consequences faced by the game's character without the intention of persuading, prescribing attitudes, provoking specific effects or achieving particular goals other than raising awareness or sensitizing people. Analogue to the "Theatre of the Oppressed", in which spectators can replace the actor and suggest a solution to the protagonist's problem, expressive games invite the players to identify with the game's character and find a solution instead of imposing one (Frasca cited in Genvo, 2016: 91). To illustrate his concept of expressive games, Genvo (2014) created the game *Keys of a Gamespace*, which puts the players in the shoes of a man with fatherhood issues related to the fact that both his father and grandfather abandoned their family before being arrested for child abuse. During the game, the players have to deal with the character's fear of determinism and eternal recurrence. They have to decide if the character will forgive his father and believe in free will. By confronting the players with these existential dilemmas and difficult choices, the game sends the underlying message that people have moral choices to make in real life (Genvo, 2016: 103). *Darfur Is Dying* (Ruiz and York, 2006) seems like another good example of an expressive game, since it provides the occasion for the players to experiment the powerlessness and the vulnerability of a Darfuri child who is trying to hide from the Janjaweed militia on his way to a well. As Bogost explains, this game "may increase player empathy" and "raise awareness about the conflict", but it "does not make a procedural argument for conflict resolution" (2007: 96). The game *That Dragon, Cancer* (Green and Larson, 2016) was, for its part, created by the father of a sick child to express his feelings about his son's cancer and sensitize the players to his difficult situation, without the "serious" intention of raising funds for research on cancer. These games all develop the players' empathy by encouraging them to identify with a character or to enter in a relation with a character who finds itself in an emotionally intense situation.

What Genvo qualifies as "expressive games" is similar to what many scholars refer to as "artgames". For Michael and Chen, artgames are "games in which the artistic expression of the game designer is more important than any other aspect" (2006: 221), while for Bogost, they are "games oriented toward introspection" and games that "cause the player to reflect on one or more themes during or after play, without a concern for resolution or effect" (2011:

14). According to Bogost, artgames “deploy a more poetic and less direct way to express ideas”, by favoring a “metaphoric treatment of ideas” (2011: 16-17). The game *Braid* (Blow, 2008), for instance, gives the possibility to rewind time and avoid making the same mistake again, in order to explore the topic of regret. The experimental game *The Marriage* (Humble, 2006), for its part, expresses the creator’s mixed feelings about marriage through the game mechanics. However, not all artgames fit in the category “expressive games”. Some of them might be qualified as such because of their aesthetic reinvention, unconventional look or audacious visual design, without necessarily expressing feelings or ideas. The game hack *Super Mario Clouds* (Coryarcangel, 2002), for instance, removed everything from the game *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) except the sky and the clouds in a way that directs our attention to these design elements.

In light of the definitions provided by game scholars, the labels “serious”, “persuasive”, and “expressive” games are mainly based on the developers’ intentions to either educate, persuade or express something, instead of relying on game mechanics like it is the case of video game genres. This is why serious, persuasive and expressive games are not considered as genres per se: they might allow different gameplay and still belong to the same category.

Interpretative Clues

If serious, persuasive and expressive games can only be distinguished on the basis of the developer’s intention, how can they be differentiated in the absence of clear indications about the designer’s goal? As Umberto Eco (1979; 1990) explains in his books *Lector in Fabula* and *The Limits of Interpretation*, authors do not always explicitly state their intentions, but often consciously or unconsciously embed, in their texts or paratexts (title, subtitle, abstract, advertisement, etc.), clues that can help the readers inferring their intentions. Readers, for their part, formulate hypotheses about the author’s intention on the basis of these textual and paratextual clues. According to Eco’s theory, the “ideal reader” is not a person made of flesh and bones who manages to fully reconstitute the author’s intention, but an abstract figure called by the text itself. I would, for my part, like to suggest that differentiating serious, persuasive and expressive games often involves retracing the developer’s intention by decoding the multiple clues that were consciously or unconsciously integrated in the game’s text and paratext (rules, booklet, advertisement, credits, etc.). Since there is always a

discrepancy between the author's intention and the reader's interpretations, explains Bogost, persuasion is more about limiting interpretations than prompting a specific response (2007: 19-20). While Bogost focuses on the role of procedurality to distinguish persuasive games and artgames, I would like to explore the idea that procedurality is not the only element involved in this process. While narrative and iconographic elements do not play an important role in identifying game genres (mostly based on the system affordances), I believe that these elements can influence the players' interpretation of the developer's intention to reach institutional goals, persuade, or express something.

In his book *Persuasive Games*, Bogost distinguishes persuasive and artgames on the basis of their procedures: while persuasive games use processes persuasively in order to convince or "argue a position", artgames (or what Genvo and I call expressive games) use processes expressively to "characterize an idea" and say something about a world experience that is relevant for the game creator such as "marriage, mortality, regret, confusion" (2011: 14). Procedures have the abilities to restrict the actions of the players, but as Harnad explains, their interpretation "is not intrinsic to the system; it is projected onto it by the interpreter" (cited in Bogost, 2007: 5). Indeed, players rarely have access to a game's programming code, in a similar way that viewers rarely have access to a filmmaker's notes. Players therefore interpret the purpose of a game by inferring the rules that drive the system. This requires what Bogost calls "procedural literacy", that is to say the ability to identify processes and read them critically (2007: 64). As Gonzalo Frasca explains, players can also challenge or review these rules according to their own values and beliefs (cited in Bogost, 2007: 64). For all these reasons, procedurality should not be conceived as a determinant factor in the process of labelling a game, but rather as an interpretative clue among others. Even though Bogost focuses on games that convince with the help of procedural rhetoric, he does not deny the fact that some persuasive games convince with the help of visual or verbal rhetoric. The game *Congo Jones* (Rainforest Foundation, 2008), for example, borrows the gameplay from *Super Mario Bros.* while applying a "graphical skin" on top of it, to raise awareness on deforestation and posit the World Bank as the main opponent (Bogost, 2007: 50). The argument of this game is therefore not built through processes, but rather through visual elements.

One interpretative clue that comes into play when differentiating serious games from persuasive and expressive games is their level of realism, which can reveal itself within game's narrative, mechanics or visual design. While the reproduction of reality in persuasive and expressive games can only be "good enough", serious games need to reach a "sufficient"¹ degree of verisimilitude to achieve their teaching goals (Michael and Chen, 2006: 32-38). Whereas expressive and persuasive games often involve simplification techniques such as random numbers, time compression, headache removal and perfect communication to provide immediate gratification and increase the players' enjoyment, serious games tend to reproduce the complexity of real-life situations unless it makes the game too difficult or boring. It is especially true for military and flight simulators, as well as for training and healthcare games that aim to prepare employees for any material world eventualities. These types of game have to maximize the accuracy of their real-life simulation and comply with their clients' procedures and equipment. One of the main goals of the military training game *America's Army*, for example, was "to be as real as it gets", even though it sacrifice some realism for the sake of entertainment (2006: 56). In contrast, the expressive game *Darfur is Dying* simplifies to the extreme the Darfuri conflict by depicting it as an ethnic cleansing and by eschewing historical explanations (Bogost, 2007: 97). The expressive game *Keys of a Gamespace*, for its part, revisits the main character's childhood imaginary world to introduce "a sense of nostalgia" and immerse the players in the character's subconscious (Genvo, 2016: 98).

A related factor that can be involved when it comes to differentiating serious, persuasive and expressive games is their ludic ethos and the importance given to entertainment. According to Genvo, serious and persuasive games adapt their ludic ethos to the specifications of their playability, while expressive games adapt their playability to their ludic ethos (2016: 103). In other words, serious and persuasive games only include fun elements if they serve their purposes, while expressive games include fun elements for fun's sake. The game *America's Army*, for instance, is made to be entertaining, so it could encourage teenagers to play the game and perhaps convince them to enroll in the army (Michael and Chen, 2006: 56). In

¹ Reaching the "ultimate" degree of realism could interfere with a serious game's goal by making it too complicated and dissuade people to play.

serious and persuasive games, entertainment is therefore a means to an end, while in expressive games entertainment is an end in itself.

Another element that can help distinguishing serious games from persuasive and expressive games is the choice of topics. Because serious games are subjected to government regulations, corporate guidelines or market laws, they have to use humor carefully, remain politically correct, elude sensitive topics and avoid controversy, in addition to being extra careful about how they portray race, gender, religions, etc. (Michael and Chen, 2006: 156-159). In contrast, persuasive and expressive games are not subjected to institutional guidelines and can therefore explore more sensitive topics such as rape, racism, incest, cancer, depression, transsexuality, etc. Their creators are usually less afraid of controversy and willing to take advantage of their greater freedom to explore unusual topics. The artgame *9/11 Survivor*, for example, resulted in public outrage because it puts the players in the shoes of a victim from the World Trade Center terrorist attack (2006: 226). *Keys of a Gamespace*, for its part, deals with one of the most delicate subjects: child abuse. Moreover, serious games generally avoid light-hearted topics, while persuasive and expressive games sometimes address mundane topics such as the daily life of a couple, the passage of time, etc. (2006: 160). Whereas serious games have to adapt their topics to their designated target and to institutional standards, it is not the case for persuasive and expressive games.

One interpretative key that might help players to discern serious games from persuasive and expressive games is their level of transparency, which can be measured by the presence of clearly stated goals and rules, as well as the inclusion of explanations about the game mechanics in the text or paratext. Most serious games allow the possibility for curious or dedicated players to learn about its internal logic and the data used to build it (Michael and Chen, 2006: 98). According to Abt, a serious game cannot achieve its pedagogical goal “if the players do not understand its rules, their objectives in the game, the consequences of their action, and the reasons for these consequences”. Because serious games should “respond more to the conscious decisions of the players than to an outside element of chance”, they should provide guidelines on which players can base their decisions (cited in Michael and Chen, 2006: 35). In contrast, an expressive game like *Keys of a Gamespace* avoids providing

guidelines to immerse players in ethical dilemmas and confront them to the difficulties of making choices (Genvo, 2016: 104).

The presence of tools that facilitate “learning feedback” can also be helpful when trying to categorize these types of games (Michael and Chen, 2006: 36). Because trainers and educators have to make sure that players learn something, most serious games provide instructions on how to involve the game in lectures or training sessions. *Power Politics III* (Mindspace, 2004), for instance, compiled teachers’ testimonies about their experience with the game in order to help other teachers using it in their classroom (2006: 124). To be useful pedagogical tools, serious games often show proof of learning by providing progress testing and tracking tools such as game levels, reports, replay controls, observer modes, coaching options, quizzes, certificates of completion, etc. (2006: 38). Since they are not aligned with institutional goals, persuasive and expressive games can avoid providing instructions or feedback tools. Instead of privileging feedback from an authority figure or an institution, the expressive game *Keys of a Gamespace* favours peer discussion between the players by including a link towards a dedicated forum.

Another key factor that might help in distinguishing serious and persuasive games from expressive games is the presence of reflexive elements that raise questions about the video game medium or the act of playing.² While most serious and persuasive games present themselves as games and contain markers indicating that “this is play”, expressive games often subvert the traditional model of playability and comprise signs that raise the question “is this play?” (Bateson (1977) cited in Genvo, 2016: 94). *Keys of a Gamespace*, for instance, challenges the players’ expectations about what a game should be with its unusual gameplay, and includes several references to classic toys and video games from the 80s that highlight how much play has changed over the past decades.

Traces of authorship can, for their part, help players in distinguishing expressive games from serious and persuasive games. According to Bogost, “artgames” (what Genvo and I call expressive games) involve subjective representations and are characterized by their strong

² Reflexivity is the capacity of signs to refer to their own system of signs. In a film, reflexive elements can be a *mise en abyme*, a look at the camera, an address to the viewers, allusions to other films, etc.).

authorship. While most serious games are created by sizeable teams with considerable budgets, most persuasive and expressive games are developed by individuals, researchers, artists, or small teams of independent game developers. *Velvet-Strike*, for instance, was made by a team of 2-3 persons and its main creator admitted that she mostly worked alone. Because expressive games often communicate personal points of view, they tend to contain autobiographical elements that relate to the creator's intimate life. It is obviously the case of *That Dragon, Cancer*, but it also seems to be the case of *Keys of a Gamespace*, in which the main character – just like the game's developer – is a game designer at the age of becoming a father.

Another important factor to take into account when it comes to differentiating serious, persuasive and expressive games is the context of distribution. While serious games tend to be sold to schools or parents, most persuasive and expressive games are downloadable for free or for a good price on the Internet. Indeed, *Darfur Is Dying* is playable on the website www.darfurisdying.com, while *Keys of a Gamespace* can be downloaded on the website www.expressivegame.com and *That Dragon, Cancer* can be bought on the website www.thatdragoncancer.com for 14.99 USD. The context of distribution is very influential because it affects the context of play and therefore the players' experience. When people play a game in the serious context of a course or a training, they tend to focus on its pedagogical aspects more than its entertaining elements. Their obligation to learn from that game encourages them to take it seriously. Contrarily, when people play games in a casual context –at home or at their friend's place–, they tend to focus on the more entertaining aspects and on maximizing enjoyment.

This list of interpretative clues is not exhaustive, but demonstrates that procedurality is not the only factor that influences the labelling of serious, persuasive or expressive games. Highlighting these elements also opens up the possibility to create a persuasive or expressive game by appropriating the program code of a serious or entertainment game, like I have done in the case of *A Conversation With Hugo*.

Case Analysis: *A Conversation With Hugo*

The game *A Conversation With Hugo* (Trépanier-Jobin, 2015) is an interesting example to show that the differentiation between serious, persuasive and expressive games relies on other elements than the program code. One of the main reasons why I chose this example among a thousand others is that I am its main creator and therefore totally aware of the developer's intention. Choosing this game allows me to conduct a "white-box analysis", that is to say study the effect of the game system with knowledge of the mechanics that produces these effects (Bogost, 2007: 63). This game is also a relevant example in the context of our discussion because it was intended to raise awareness on the rigidity of gender binaries and on bullying without pointing players towards definitive answers, but was nonetheless made with the serious game content editor SECRA. *A Conversation With Hugo* simulates a discussion with an 8-year-old boy who had never had problems at school, but had recently started making up excuses in order to stay home during the school week. The players have to imagine that they are his parent, sitter or guardian, gain his trust and help him to face his problem, by choosing replies among six statements that express different types of attitudes. If the players adopt an understanding attitude, avoid trivializing the situation or judging him, Hugo will open up and admit that he has been called a "faggot" by a group of boys at school because he prefers to play with dolls in the company of girls than to play with them. Hugo will eventually realize that the boys from his school are closed-minded, that he should not feel ashamed about his pastimes and that he should tell his teacher or director about the situation. If the players misread Hugo's feelings, minimize the importance of the situation or opt for homophobic, sexist or stereotypical statements, Hugo will, however, close-up and leave. Whereas serious games created with SECRA aim to teach players that active listening is the most rewarding attitude to adopt when trying to help someone, *A Conversation With Hugo* was intended to favor the players' empathy towards the game's character and encourage them to reflect upon the attitude that they instinctively adopted in the face of gender-based harassment, while entertaining.

SECRA was developed by the Québécois governmental organization *Centre collégial de développement de matériel didactique* (CCDMD) to teach college students how to react in situations that they might encounter during their career (dealing with the fear of a cancer patient, the sorrow of a policeman, the stubbornness of a kindergarten child, etc.). Its

procedural rhetoric is based on two models of communication respectively developed by the psychologists Roger Mucchielli's (1966) and Thomas Gordon's (1979). It encourages the players to adopt an understanding attitude when aiding someone, instead of an interpretative, evaluative, supportive, expeditious or investigative attitude. Whenever the players choose a reply that illustrates another attitude, the program code brings them closer to the conversation rupture point. If the players choose these replies three times in a row, Hugo puts an end to the conversation and leaves. If, on the contrary, the players choose replies that illustrate the understanding attitude, the software leads them to the next level of the conversation and brings them closer to winning the game. During the conversation, the character's facial expression and body language help the players to determine if they adopted an attitude that will gain Hugo's trust. *A Conversation With Hugo's* program code therefore makes an argument in favour of active listening, instead of expressing a point of view about gender binaries and bullying. By doing so, the program code, however, favors empathy in a way that is typical to expressive games. Since I did not author the game processes, the ideas that I wished to express are not conveyed by the program code, but rather by the dialogues. Furthermore, I had to rely on other elements than procedurality to move *A Conversation With Hugo* away from the serious and persuasive game categories.

The first elements that can help the players to conceive *A Conversation With Hugo* as an expressive game are its cartoonish character, its vintage visual design and its unrealistic dialogues. While serious games created with SECRA superimpose the picture of an actor on a realistic (but slightly blurred and tinted) background, *A Conversation with Hugo* superimposes the highly modified image of an actor (who now looks like Tim Burton's characters with big heads and wide eyes) on an artificial 2D decor created with the collage of different pictures that were transformed with an artistic filter. This cartoonish imagery was intended to change the players' perception of the game's seriousness while encouraging them to focus on its more entertaining aspects. The dialogues in all serious games created with SECRA were written by experts in order to be as realistic as possible. In contrast, the dialogues in *A Conversation With Hugo* are used as a vehicle to express my own point of view about gender binaries, instead of recreating a realistic conversation with an 8-year-old boy. Some players who tested the game prototype even mentioned that Hugo's statements often sound too mature for his age.

The choice of topics in the game *A Conversation With Hugo* can also be a good indicator of the game's status. The topics of all serious games created with SECRA revolve around situations that college students (who want to become nurses, psychologists, policemen or childcare workers, etc.) might encounter during their career (cancer, insomnia, burnout, jealousy, etc.). While bullying could be addressed by *A Conversation With Hugo* to prepare eventual teachers for this widespread phenomenon, the game also conveys a message against gender binaries that would be quite unusual for a serious game. Moreover, *A Conversation With Hugo* allows the players to choose insulting and rude replies that might be offensive to some people. I also used the time compression technique to make *A Conversation With Hugo* more entertaining. While most dialogues in the serious games developed with SECRA are three-lines long, I reduced the length of the dialogues in *A Conversation With Hugo* to maximize the players' enjoyment.

Another element that might help the players to interpret *A Conversation with Hugo* as an expressive game rather than a serious game is the absence of clear explanations in its paratext. All serious games made with SECRA display a series of guidelines, in order to make sure that the players base their decisions on the game's theoretical background instead of selecting replies randomly. More precisely, the players can read a two pages-long document that describes six possible attitudes of the helper, as well as the possible verbal and non-verbal reactions of the person in need of help. After reading these detailed guidelines, the players have more chance to win the game on the first try and therefore face a smaller challenge. At their completion, serious games made with SECRA also provide a full report that displays the players' statistics, compares their conversation with an ideal one and associates every chosen reply to a specific attitude. This report is included in the game to make sure that the players understand why they succeeded or failed, so they can learn from their mistakes and make more judicious choices when they face a similar situation at work. In the case of *A Conversation With Hugo*, the players' statistics are also displayed at the end of the game, but the guidelines were removed from the paratext and the full report of the game conversation was replaced by the following message:

Sorry! The replies that you selected did not help Hugo to solve his problem. Next time, adopt a more understanding attitude, avoid trivializing the situation, or making value

judgments. If you wish to start the conversation over, go to the "Home" menu. But before doing so, you can review your statistics to see what attitudes you previously adopted.

This message gives some hints on how to succeed without directly telling players how to win the game. The statistics, for their part, provide a general idea of the attitudes adopted by the players without associating each of them to particular replies. This alternative presentation of the players' performance is intended to increase the game's level of difficulty and encourage people to play it again.

The next characteristic that can lead players to identify *A Conversation With Hugo* as an "expressive game" is the absence of paratextual indications about how to use the game in an educational context, as well as the absence of tools that provide learning feedback. In contrast, all serious games made with SECRA suggest, in their paratext, several ways to utilize the game in a classroom with college students. The documentation, for instance, recommends playing the game in front of the students, before starting a discussion on the impact of each attitude. It also proposes to let the students play, print their result and reflect upon their choices. It finally suggests using the game in the context of a group discussion and encouraging the students to write their thoughts about the game. At the end of all serious games produced with SECRA, the players can print the verbatim of their conversation and submit it to their teachers. Because *A Conversation With Hugo* was not made to be played in a classroom or teach players how to interact with a victim of bullying, these pedagogical guidelines and learning feedback tools were simply removed. It is, however, interesting to mention that 60% of the people who tested the prototype would have liked more explanation. This highlights the difficulty of moving the game away from the serious game category without authoring its processes.

A Conversation With Hugo's high level of reflexivity can also incite the players to identify it as an expressive game. One of the game's primary goals is to make the players realize that our game culture was socially constructed as gendered (boys play sports while girls play with dolls). While the expressive game *Keys of a Gamespace* raises the question "what is a game?", the expressive game *A Conversation With Hugo* raises the question "what is

conceived as a feminine and a masculine game in our society?” while highlighting the absurdity of such binaries.

The markers of authorship that can be found in *A Conversation With Hugo* also provide paratextuel clues about the game status. In addition to using a content editor designed by my mother to conceive the game and having my cousin play the role of Hugo, I incorporated pictures of my great-grandparents in the background to complete the family portrait and make this game a more personal artwork. Even though it is hard to guess that these pictures are those of my great-grandparents, the players who read the credits can realize that I am the only creator of the dialogues and the graphic design. They can also notice that I share a family name with other people who participated in the project. Moreover, those who click on my name’s hyperlink and end up on my researcher website might figure out that I have been concerned by the negative consequences of gender binaries for the past ten years.

The fact that *A conversation with Hugo* is distributed on an independent website (conversation-hugo.com), instead of being distributed on SECRA’s educational website (secra.ccdmd.qc.ca) alongside the other serious game produced with the content editor, might also influence the players’ perception of the game. Publishing a game on SECRA’s website encourages college teachers to use it in their classroom, while creating an independent website to distribute *A Conversation With Hugo* signals that the game might not meet the verisimilitude requirements to be used in an educational context. This choice also indicates that not only college students are invited to play the game, but people from all ages and socio-cultural backgrounds. It is worth mentioning that the game prototype was tested in two very different contexts: at first during the exhibition *Indie Game Montreal* that hosted players from all horizons and backgrounds who wanted to discover new entertaining games, and at last during a university course on serious games with students from the Sociology Department at Concordia University. The players who visited the exhibition generally found Hugo’s reactions and dialogues more appropriate than the students in the classroom context, even though the latter were previously told about the intentions behind *A Conversation With Hugo*. This might be explained by the fact that a game made by a professor and played in the context of a course is expected to be more educative than entertaining.

Despite my efforts to move *A Conversation With Hugo* away from the serious game model called by its program code, nothing guarantees that the players will interpret it as an expressive game. Some of those who tested the prototype focused on the psychological model of communication valued by the game, instead of the message about gender binaries and bullying. In the case of *A Conversation With Hugo*, the risks of misinterpreting the developer's intention are higher because the program code sends a different message than the dialogues, but most importantly because players who do not go far enough in the game cannot reach the message about gender binaries and bullying.

Avoiding the Essentialist Trap

The presence or absence of markers that indicate the level of realism, transparency, reflexivity, controversy, entertainment, learning feedback and authorship should not be used to dictate if a game qualifies as a serious, persuasive or expressive game, but rather conceived as interpretative clues that help the players to formulate a hypothesis about the developer's goal. Moreover, these markers should not limit the players to one kind of use. Games can always be appropriated and played differently than what they were intended for. A commercial game designed to entertain can be played by students in a classroom while the professor analyzes the game mechanics or pinpoints its stereotypes. Inversely, an educational game conceived to be used in a classroom can be played at home for fun. As Bogost explains, all games can be played seriously or casually depending on the context of play, as well as on the player's mood (2011: 5). The underwater diving simulator *Crate* (BreakAway Game), for instance, both served to train soldiers and to alleviate the pain of children during chemotherapy (Michael and Chen, 2006: 6). *Microsoft Flight Simulator* and *America's Army* were played by future pilots or soldiers, as well as by millions of teenagers who simply wanted to have fun. Moreover, the entertainment game industry adapted serious games such as *American's Army* for a wider audience, and government agencies modified entertainment games such as *Harpoon 3*, *Warcraft*, and *Doom* to fit the military's requirements (2006: 54-60). We should therefore avoid the essentialist trap when it comes to labelling a game and instead always leave open the possibility that institutions and players use games in unexpected ways.

Despite my efforts to differentiate the categories “serious”, “persuasive” and “expressive” games with interpretative clues such as procedurality, level of realism, choice of topics, entertaining aspect, level of transparency, learning feedback, reflexive elements, traces of authorship, and the context of distribution, it must be noted that it is impossible to draw sharp distinctions between them. When the creator’s intention is not clearly stated, labelling a game remains a highly subjective act, influenced by the players’ personal encyclopedia, procedural literacy, persistence and context of play. Labels can be useful to describe a game in a few words, but it should never become prescriptive nor confine the players in a single use. Without denying the influence of procedurality on the perception of a game, I challenged the idea that the game procedures are the only elements that help to differentiate serious, persuasive and expressive games. It would, however, be interesting to conduct a reception study with the game *A Conversation with Hugo* to see if the players notice other interpretative clues and feel educated about active listening more than sensitized to the negative consequences of gender binaries. This could allow us to better understand if procedurality has a bigger influence than other elements when it comes to inferring the developer’s intention to educate, persuade or express something.

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List of Video Games

A Conversation With Hugo (Trépanier-Jobin, 2015)

America's Army (Ubisoft, 2002)

Antiwargame (Josh, 2001)

Braid (Blow, 2008)

Crate (BreakAway Game)

Dafur Is Dying (Ruiz and York, 2006)

Doom (ID Software, 1993)

Flight Simulator (Microsoft, 1982)

Harpoon 3 (Advanced Gaming Systems, 2001)

Howard Dean for Iowa (Bogost and Frasca, 2003)

Kabul Kaboom (Frasca, 2002)

Keys of a Gamespace (Genvo, 2014)

Mansion Impossible (Unknown)

McDonald's Videogame (Molleindustria, 2006)

Power Politics III (MindSpace, 2004)

Save the Whales (20th Century Fox, 1984)

Secra (Trépanier and Blais, 2013)

September 12 (Frasca, 2003)

Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo, 1985)

Super Mario Clouds (Coryarcangel, 2002)

Take Back Illinois (Bogost, 2004)

Tenure (Gaede, 1975)

The Marriage (Humble, 2006)

Tooth Protectors (Johnson & Johnson, 1983)

Velvet-Strike (Schleiner, 2002),

Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 1994)

Résumé

Cet article met en lumière les similarités et les différences entre les jeux « sérieux », « persuasifs » et « expressifs ». Puisque ces catégories reposent sur l'intention du concepteur et que cette intention n'est pas toujours clairement énoncée, je m'efforce d'identifier les indices textuels et paratextuels pouvant aider les joueurs à la reconstituer. Afin d'illustrer l'idée que la procéduralité n'est pas le seul facteur impliqué dans la catégorisation de ces jeux, je m'appuie sur plusieurs exemples et fais une auto-analyse détaillée de mon jeu *Une conversation avec Hugo*. Je précise enfin qu'il faut éviter le piège essentialiste lorsque vient le temps de catégoriser ces types de jeux.

Mots-clés : jeux vidéo, catégorisation, jeux sérieux, jeux persuasifs, jeux expressifs