Defining and Designing Expressive Games: the Case of *Keys of a Gamespace*

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Abstract

This article initially presents the background and the theoretical framework going along with a research – creation initiative that focuses on the concept of "expressive game", which encourages players to experience various ethical and moral choices, allowing them to understand the consequences of those choices. To do this, a reflection is conducted on the specificities of games as a form of expression around the concepts of ludic mediation, playability and ludic ethos. It will then enable us to show how the exploration of these leads has been integrated in design issues by taking the example of *Keys of a Gamespace* – a PC game developed by the author of this article.

Keywords: expressive games, playability, ludic ethos, procedural rhetoric

Résumé en français à la fin du texte

Introduction

Digital games have always raised the question of the topics they were able to express. During the first economic crisis of the video games industry, in 1983, game designer Chris Crawford published a pioneering book on this issue. He argued that video games had been "puerile" so far. In order to allow digital games to reach maturity, Crawford called for a better understanding of games as a creative medium.

Research on these topics, however, really started to take shape and develop some twenty years later with the advent of *Game Studies*. For example, the study of the kind of topics or emotions expressed by digital games has been conducted by Stephen Kline *et al.* in their book *Digital Play*, by taking into account how the context of production and development have influenced the expressive potential of the medium:

> while interactive games are in many ways genuinely new media, their possibilities are being realized and limited by a media market whose fundamental imperative remains the same as that which shaped the old media: profit. While this encounter between digital media and capitalist markets may in part (as the new-economy gurus claim) be reshaping markets, it is also constraining and channeling the directions taken by new media" (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, De Peuter, 2003: 255).

Indeed, Kline *et al.* identify some dominant (but not exclusive) topics in the history of video games, which are largely related to "militarized masculinity" (conflict, conquest, war, etc.)

Some game designers and researchers have been active in this respect around the 2000s to claim a diversification of the topics conveyed by video games. This is the case of Gonzalo Frasca, who noted that unlike other media, games haven't experimented a lot with problems of everyday life, focusing more on "the fantasy genre, the monsters and trolls" (2001). However, Frasca claims that like any representational medium, video games can also become a mirror in which players could look to find answers to the problems of their lives. On a theoretical basis, he shows that video games could draw on the techniques of the theater of

91

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www.kinephanos.ca

the oppressed, which portrays a situation of oppression in which all spectators can step in to replace the protagonist and offer a solution.

Since the publication of *Digital Play*, the video game market has been undergoing a transformation. The emergence of an independent game production scene now offers a possible arena for a wider content diversification through alternative models of development. Some games, such as *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013), show that digital games can be used to express views about individual or societal issues and contribute to social debates.

My research and game design on expressive games are based on similar principles. I also think that like any other medium, video games can allow people to express a social, psychological or cultural problem and video games can deal with complex or difficult topics while moving us. But as a playable object, and unlike other media, I think that games may also allow players to express themselves on these topics within the game. This approach of games has led to the development of an experimental game, *Keys of a gamespace* (2011, available at http://www.expressivegame.com). A theoretical framework focusing on the understanding of the expressive specificities of games has therefore been formalized in order to understand if this game has reached its goal. Through the case study of *Keys of a gamespace* (KOAG), we will see how this framework might help to define the concept of expressive game, which is a different concept compared to other notions that might look similar at first sight, such as serious games or persuasive games.

I will present some examples of game design choices made during the development and the reception of players. Online reactions have been collected through the forum on the game's website, blogs and newspapers, and a qualitative survey has been conducted using interviews administrated to 25 players. This paper presents the most meaningful part of this study and the main aspects of the methodology used to document the players' point of view.

Beyond procedural rhetoric

In the same vein as Frasca, Ian Bogost frontally addressed the question of the "expressive power of video games" (2007). Bogost argues that to make video games count as expressive artifacts, it is necessary to understand how they can be designed to support theories on

92

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Exploring the Frontiers of Digital Gaming: Traditional Games, Expressive Games, Pervasive Games, special issue, April 2016
www.kinephanos.ca

everyday life and reality. Bogost believes that compared to other forms of representation, video games are based on a new form of rhetoric that relies on a procedural functioning, which opens a new field of persuasive expression: the system of rules and mechanics conveys the message of the game. In this context, video games can be used to develop arguments on the functioning of political, economic or other systems and encourage players to move from "the game world to the real world". It should be noted that with his approach, Bogost wants to stand out from the approach prevailing in serious games, which are created to support established interests and do not represent the full potential of persuasive games. Persuasive games are also designed to go against worldviews set by governments, companies, etc. Yet the persuasive games that Bogost wanted do not fundamentally differ from serious games regarding the way they work, as they are both based on a communicational instrumentalization of games (Amato, 2007) in order to convey a predefined point of view.

Therefore, it appears that the exploration of the expressive potential of video games may also go beyond persuasion issues. As Frasca's theory shows, it is possible to consider that video games can share a problematic life experience, without necessarily leading to a predefined solution (Frasca notes that the aim of his work is primarily to encourage social debate rather than to suggest a solution). Furthermore, As Miguel Sicart points out, it is also necessary to consider the player's part in the process:

> the missing part in the mechanism of procedural discourse is the player. Not the player as a configurator of the system, which is the implicit position taken by many proceduralist theorists and developers, but the player as a living, breathing, culturally embodied, ethically and politically engaged being who plays not only for an ulterior purpose, but for *play*'s sake. (2010)

In our view, understanding what an "expressive" game is (not just a "persuasive" one) requires taking into account that the expressiveness comes from procedures induced by the game structure and actions carried out by the player at the same time. This is why a reflection on the expressive specificities of video games must also take into account what constitutes its playful dimension for the player.

Thinking game expressiveness through the concept of ludic mediation

Procedurality and simulation are parts of video games, but all procedures and all simulations are not considered as games by players. Therefore, a structure which aims to be seen as a

_____
93

Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
Exploring the Frontiers of Digital Gaming: Traditional Games, Expressive Games, Pervasive Games, special issue, April 2016
www.kinephanos.ca

game has to proceed through a "ludic mediation", which means that designing a game requires understanding the modalities for the transmission of a shared meaning of play. This approach of games can be found in Bateson's theories of play, who stressed that a game is a fact of communication, based on the exchange of messages or signals. From this perspective, it can be argued that gaming-oriented devices must convince the recipient of their playfulness through pragmatic markers that meet certain cultural representations of the activity and incite to consider this object as a game.

Following the theory of play and fantasy by Bateson, it is necessary to understand through what signs (or pragmatic markers) games carry the message "this is play" (Bateson 1977). This means that it is necessary to describe the ways in which objects claiming to be games may conform to the dimensions usually associated with play activity in order to be recognized and accepted as "play tools".

This does not exclude the possibility of finding in these objects characteristics that go against established standards of what a game is meant to be. The French philosopher Jacques Henriot (1989) argues for example that the meanings and connotations associated with games are culturally constructed, people have different ideas of what a game is and these ideas evolve over time and space. But unusual game characteristics in a given context may lead to a more complex form of play, with "a game which is constructed not upon the premise *this is play* but rather upon the question *is this play?*" (Bateson, 1977: 214). In my point of view, this latter type of game can bring the concept of game to apply to new realities if non-standard features are accepted by players. Some games appear to reflect upon their status because they do not assume the usual features of games (which can also lead to change the representations associated with games).

As Bogost (2007) has shown, it is possible to create links between rhetoric and video games and I therefore consider that the attributes of a game which aim to communicate to the user "this is play" make up what I call the oeuvre's ludic ethos. The concept of ethos, which comes from classical rhetoric, refers to the traits of character a speaker needs to display to an audience in order to confer authority on his words and provide guarantees regarding his speech. Ethos should also be understood as a notion which conveys "a value system". The

94
Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
Exploring the Frontiers of Digital Gaming: Traditional Games, Expressive Games, Pervasive Games, special issue, April 2016
www.kinephanos.ca

ethos aims to construct a universe where a user may "feel at home" and evolves "in complicity". In the case of games, this led to analyze the values conferred on the ludic activity by a software program in order to appropriate it as a game and to incite someone to play with it. In *Digital Play* (2003), Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter identified, for example, the predominance of themes linked to what they called "militarized masculinity" in the very first video games. These themes paved the way for a major industrial expansion, with given male teenagers as that the main target audience. The first places these games were played (bars and arcades) acted as a field for experimentation to develop products to be used with the first home consoles. The concept of ludic ethos invites us to understand how individuals are guided in their play activity by some "pragmatic markers", and how structures build a universe of specific values to be accepted as a game.

However, to understand the ways in which a situation may be suitable for play, it should also be noted that according to French philosopher Jacques Henriot, play cannot take place in all locations and at any time. As Henriot points out, a game needs to be played but to be played it needs to be playable (unplayable games would thus have little chance of being recognized and characterized as being typical of that which is a game). For example, a flood will not be very playable: "the situations which create these kinds of events leave no room for initiative for those caught up in them. They have no choice. There is nothing they can do about it." (Henriot 1989: 193). To sum up then, some situations display characteristics which do not allow those involved to play (even if they display a ludic ethos) and not being able to carry out an action having significant repercussions on the way events unfold is one of those aspects. What makes in my point of view the playability of a situation is that the player will be able to do the exercise of different possibilities offered to him or her. The playability of a situation is based on the degrees of contingency it allows (Malaby, 2007).

The playability of a situation will depend on the individual who appropriates it. The same situation can quite easily have a high level of playability for one person while being totally unplayable for another. Monopoly is a playable game for people who know how to count with a recommended age for players of 8 years old and over. Moreover, the expectations made around what we expect from games in term of playability change over time and space, showing that playability has also to be considered as a socio-cultural construction.

In this way, by including a given playability and a given ethos, a structure designed to be recognized and appropriated as a game will also appeal to certain types of players who are likely to either possess or be able to acquire a certain ludic skill and knowledge, with expectations toward games. Overall this structure sketches out the profile of a certain "model player", who may not necessarily be the empirical player but who in any case personifies the interpretative strategy of a game structure. The model player represents the pragmatic context for which the game was initially designed although this does not mean reappropriation cannot occur.

In order to illustrate how these three notions (ludic ethos/playability/model player) may be used to analyze the expressiveness of a game, I will detail the way they may be applied to the analysis of an experimental game, *Keys of a gamespace.*

Keys of a Gamespace

KOAG presents the story of a man who has an issue with fatherhood and this problem is destructive for his couple. To learn about the reasons for the character's psychological blocking toward fatherhood, the player will have to progress through different scenes (and find their keys, literally and figuratively). These scenes are imaginary mental spaces and memories. The player gradually discovers that the hero's problems are caused by the relationship with his own father, who abandoned his family during the adolescence of the character, and who was arrested years later for having abused little girls. The player will learn that this story also repeats the acts of the hero's grandfather, who also abandoned his children and was arrested for sex abuse against children. During the game, the player becomes aware of questions and fears of the hero against determinism and the repetition of history. In order to express the determinism postulated by the hero, the playability presents very limited possibilities in the way you can solve the puzzles or explore his memories. But during the final scenes, the player is faced with several choices in relation to the way he will act toward the father (does he forgive him or not) and if he believes in free-will or not. At the end of the game, the player is incited to think about the consequences of these choices; a small text comments the decisions the player has made and invites him/her to discuss them on a forum, in a perspective of social debate. For example, if the player decides to forgive the father and

_____ 96
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Exploring the Frontiers of Digital Gaming: Traditional Games, Expressive Games, Pervasive Games, special issue, April 2016
www.kinephanos.ca

doesn't believe in free will, the text says: "Does this mean you think the father cannot be held responsible because his actions were determined by his personal history? Couldn't he have done anything to prevent the evil from occurring? Discuss the reason of your choices on the forum of our website".
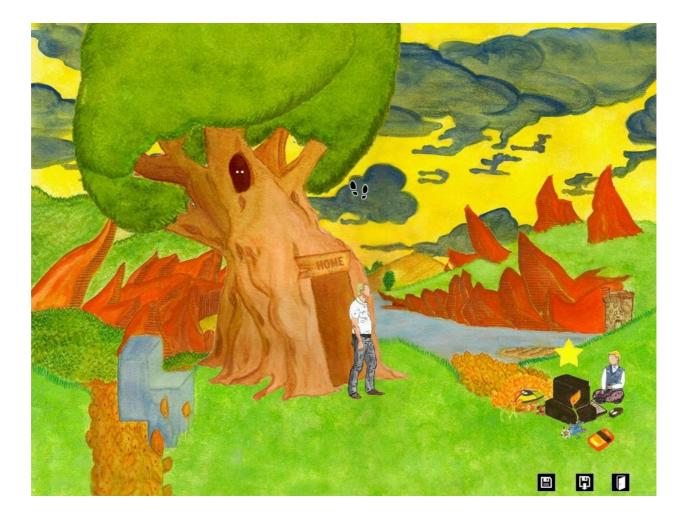

Figure 1. *Keys of a Gamespace*: the hero revisits his childhood imaginary world

My main design problematic is that the purpose of this type of game is far from the usual norms of digital gaming, generally more oriented towards fun (Koster, 2005). The purpose and theme of the work may then question its perception as a game ("is it play?"). The aim is to achieve a ludic mediation ("this is play") in order to successfully present the life of others as a game that we will experience in order to understand their problems in real life. In other words, my game tends to encourage the player to consider that video games are not limited to

97

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Exploring the Frontiers of Digital Gaming: Traditional Games, Expressive Games, Pervasive Games, special issue, April 2016
www.kinephanos.ca

the single pursuit of fun and might deal with everyday life problems. The game's overall objective is also to encourage the player to view video games as a possible form of individual expression. It is an incentive to change the expectation a player may have toward what a game is and the purpose of a game. At the beginning of the game and on its website, a short text also explains the conceptual approach behind the game, stressing that "just like cinema or comics, we think that video games in general are not a minor medium of expression. They can also deal with heavy or complex topics".

As we shall see, the meta-discursive purpose and the topics of the game (offense to childhood) differentiate this game from common video games; this kind of topic has rarely been addressed in the medium. However, at the same time, the mediation process inscribes the ludic ethos in some very common features. To facilitate the player's immersion, the game does a lot of references to game culture. The interface is the same as a point'n'click Sierra adventure game. The main character is a game developer and games have always inhabited his imagination and memories. The scenes are loaded with references to games of the 80s and 90s. This establishes a common memory and culture of video games, allowing players to "find themselves" in the game and to evolve "in complicity".

For example, there is a scene where the hero revisits his imaginary childhood. This scene occurs at the beginning of the game and contrasts with other darker ones to come. The set is full of typical toys of the 80s and makes reference to games such as *Shadow of the Beast* (Psygnosis 1989), *Tetris* (1984, Pajitnov) and *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985). It aims at introducing a sense of nostalgia of childhood games, which can be shared by some players. In this way, even if some attributes of the ludic ethos of the game can engage the player to ask "is this play?", other signs encourage to consider that "this is play". We will see in which ways this interpretative strategy drawn by the ludic ethos and the playability has succeeded or failed to challenge the expectation players may have toward the characteristics and connotations of a game.

Players survey

A first useful source to analyze how players have perceived KOAG is the list of reviews on online newspapers and blogs, and foremost websites dedicated to independent games. One

_____ 98

Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X

Exploring the Frontiers of Digital Gaming: Traditional Games, Expressive Games, Pervasive Games, special issue, April 2016
www.kinephanos.ca

could expect these reviews to be receptive to expressive games, because numerous independent games are based on experimenting with the video game norms, and indeed some very good reviews have been made on those websites. It is interesting to understand how they justify their appreciations. For example, the very first review of KOAG has been written on *Do it yourself gamers*, a blog dedicated to the indie game scene. The paper mentions that "Genvo's team largely achieves its goal of showing how games can be a major medium of expression" (Polson, 2011). One justification used by the blogger shows how some elements of the ludic ethos succeeded in provoking a reflexive attitude toward the purpose of this game and toward possible purposes of games in general:

> At first after completing the game, I wrestled with the protagonist being a gamer/game developer. I wondered why he couldn't be just a normal guy neglecting his wife. I felt this would immediately alienate the people that would play the game: namely, gamers. Then I realized that having the story center around a gamer is effective for the point behind *Keys of a GameSpace*. I walked away with thinking the lesson is that people have choices in life as they do in games. These choices have consequences. Just as gamers analyze what to do in a situation on a game, they should do so in real life when confronted with certain issues or challenges. (Polson 2011)

Other reviewers also refer to elements of the ludic ethos to explain their engagement in the game: "The game's seemingly mundane, yet powerful opening scene really connected with me as I saw my old self in the main character; spending time with others in the game space, missing out on experiencing real life in the process" (Hutchings, 2011).

The playability is also another important element in the understanding of the game's reflexive purpose:

> While I can't say any more about the game's plot without spoiling it, I can say that this point-and-click psychological game will take players on an emotional ride that will make anyone question his or her own morality. The deeper into his subconscious mind the players go, the heavier the themes and ethical dilemmas become, climaxing in one of the most difficult choices one has to ever make in the video game space. (Hutchings, 2011)

If these reviews give an insight on the reasons why KOAG raises the interest of a given type of players (who are likely to appreciate experimental games and whose expectations about video games may be close to the ones presented by the authors), it should be noted that some websites about video games in general and generalist media have also expressed some very positive reviews. For example, KOAG has been mentioned as one of the twelve 2011's best

99

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Exploring the Frontiers of Digital Gaming: Traditional Games, Expressive Games, Pervasive Games, special issue, April 2016
www.kinephanos.ca

free games by *The Daily Telegraph* and has been reviewed on *PCgamer.com* as "an incredibly engaging game". In this case the journalist praises the originality of the game's concept: "[The people behind KOAG] believe video games can be used to tell stories that tap into our minds, and explore the minds of characters. *Keys of a Gamespace* is an example of what they can do with this idea: a profoundly moving point-and-click adventure game, filled with fresh ideas and creative storytelling methods" (Denby 2011). These kind of reviews might encourage us to think that KOAG has the potential to engage different kind of players, and this is one of the reasons why I have chosen to conduct a qualitative survey on different profiles of players.

Before I present this survey, it is also important to mention that KOAG has received some "negative" reviews. Those reviews are interesting because they mainly come from websites specialized in independent games. They are useful to show how similar expectations may lead to very different appreciations of the same game. This divergence of appreciation comes from the experience each individual will make of the playability and ludic ethos of the game, based on their very own ludic knowledge and/or socio-cultural context. In my point of view, it invites us to nuance behaviorist approaches of the ludic mediation and encourages constructivist ones. For example, a review on *indiegamereviewer.com* presents the purpose of the game and why it fails at accomplishing it: "Both the game's fictional content and game mechanics do not inspire conversation about the gaming experience and its connection to our everyday experiences and philosophies. Instead, it risks alienating the very people who are willing to see video games as thought-provoking" (Tanya Kan 2011). According to the reviewer, the game brevity is one of the main problems along with its restrained playability: "for something with such mature subject matter, we are being treated to bite-sized presentations that are no more elucidating than a gossip column"; "the game seems to suggest that it celebrates free choice, just as my own gameplay experience seem to suggest its opposite" (Tanya Kan 2011).

As we will see by presenting the survey, the length of the game experience is typically the kind of characteristic which heavily depends on the player's ludic skill. But we may think that other professional reviewers have equivalent skills and the brevity of the game has not been mentioned as a problem. In the same way, the choices offered to the players and the

_____ 100
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www.kinephanos.ca

meaning of these choices were highly appreciated by other reviewers. An interesting point is that, according to Tanya Kan, the game brevity and the game mechanisms are problematic for the characters development. The review focus more precisely on female characters: "This lack of character development is repeated amongst other characters, particularly women" (Tanya Kan 2011). Nevertheless, it is difficult to deepen the understanding of the game appreciation only on the basis of online reviews. It shows the necessity of resituating the context of the player's game experience if one wants to understand how "meaningful play" is created (Salen & Zimmerman 2004). Another limit in considering online reviews is that they represent a very particular player's profile: video game enthusiasts or professional reviewers (who both have strong ludic knowledge and skills). A qualitative survey conducted with 25 players was designed to deepen the understanding of the game's appreciation according to different players' profiles. One of the main focus of the survey was to understand if the users have seen this software as a game and if this was a playful experience for them.

The group was made of 9 women and 16 men, from people who had barely ever played a video game (for example a 53 y.o. woman) to hard-core gamers (for example a 22 y.o. man playing at least 17.5 hours a week). Because of the game's topic, which aims a mature audience, the youngest player was 18. The fastest player finished the game in 21 minutes whereas the slowest finished it in 93 minutes, for an average duration of 41 minutes. The survey technique consisted in open questions about their general appreciation of the game (for example if they have found that it was a good game and why, if the game was engaging) and about their expectations toward games in general ("for you, what is a game supposed to be?"). Each player had to give information about their digital game practices ("how many hours do you play video games in a week?", "what are your favorite kinds of games?", etc.).

Some players have refused to see KOAG as a game because of its ludic ethos and/or playability. The 53 y.o. woman did not want to consider it as a game for the topic was too sensitive to be played with. For her, KOAG was the setting of a situation to experiment. It is also important to note that she was a social worker and that the topic addressed by KOAG was something she already knew through her daily job. In other words, sensitive topics might go against the player's expectations toward games. Another player who had a good knowledge of video games (a 20 y.o. woman who played video games since she was 7) said

101
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Exploring the Frontiers of Digital Gaming: Traditional Games, Expressive Games, Pervasive Games, special issue, April 2016
www.kinephanos.ca

it was more a narrative than a game because it was too "directive" and it lacked the usual features of video games in terms of goals and events, such as "saving a princess", "rewards", "fights", etc. A player from the survey also found that KOAG could not be considered as a game because a game has to entertain, to be fun and to be separated from daily life. But some players have a more nuanced view of the status of KOAG as a game. A 22 y.o. man, who considered himself as a casual player (with a limited knowledge of video games) saw it as a game on its form but not on its content, because of the philosophical dimension of the game. He said that KOAG was challenging his definition of a video game, because his expectations toward this media was more oriented toward entertainment and fun. These feedbacks confirm the assumption grounding our main design problematic that fun is an important part of a game for some players, and if one wants to deal with sensitive/unusual topics, it is then necessary to take into account the usual connotations of what a game should be. The main difficulty might be to go beyond these usual expectations in order to develop unconventional game characteristics.

Other players were enthusiast and saw KOAG as a new kind of game. This is the case of one hard-core gamer (a 22 y.o. student) who said that KOAG was at the same time a game and a little bit more than a game. Referring to games such as *Quake* (Id Software, 1996), this player said that he was not used to this kind of work, which develops a different approach of what games should be by questioning our everyday life. Viewing KOAG as a new kind of game was also the subject of a topic on the game's forum. What is interesting in the topic is that a player justifies his point of view both on the basis of his own experience of games and the one offered by the KOAG's playability and ethos:

> I enjoyed being immersed in the character's memories or even unconscious. Even if the possibilities are limited, here is a 'game' that triggers real thoughts. I like to play, but not fight or kill...: games without fight are very limited. I like to think too. Until now, all the games I played weren't very deep in thinking stuff. […] I'm convinced by the creative potential of video games: not only graphic or audio design, but artistic creativity. A game can create a true experience, as deep as those coming from reading a book or watching a film. Maybe even deeper, as the game universe is even more immersive, and the gamer is more involved than a reader due to the freedom of action.

The survey conducted on KOAG's players and online reviews show how the same element of playability and/or ludic ethos might lead to different interpretations regarding its "game aspect", this according to the ludic skills, knowledge and socio-cultural context of the player.

102

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www.kinephanos.ca

Moreover, designing a game upon unconventional characteristics and inciting the players to ask themselves the question "is this play?", might lead to change the definition, connotations and expectations these players have toward what they call a game.

Expressive games: when playability serves ludic ethos

According to Miguel Sicart (and this is also what the players survey has shown), the message delivered by a game has to be seen as a conversation between the game and the player, who has his or her own values and beliefs. Leading a reflection on the relationship between ethos and playability is a way to explore the ways games create this conversation. This is on this point that expressive games may differ from the notions of serious games or persuasive games. Compared to persuasive games, the aim of expressive games is to have a broader approach of expressiveness. Games can also be used to express views about broader societal problems and foster public debates without aiming at prescribing attitudes. This is particularly what I wanted to implement through *Keys of a gamespace*, so as to reflect the hero's questions about forgiveness, determinism and choice of actions available to him. There is no correct answer to the situation, and each player has to make his/her own opinion by reflecting on the moral choice he/she has made.

In a way, what I consider to be expressive games are games that adapt the playability to the requirements of their ludic ethos, whereas digital games usually adapt the ethos to the necessities of the playability. Playability is commonly the first goal of game designers and ludic ethos supports playability to incite the player to act, which also explains the presence of some dominant themes or emotions in video games. As Bernard Perron says, "notions of control (or loss of control) and action are at the heart of the video game experience. This explains why fear remains the most exploited gaming emotion. It is clearly oriented towards an object and a goal. It is a primary and prototypical emotion that has a strong tendency to action" (Perron, 2005: 360). In the same way, topics related to militarized masculinity adapt easily to the action imperative of video games, especially if one takes into consideration, as does the authors of *Digital Play*, that the game industry is a globalized one: "Violence is a cultural idiom that requires no translation within increasingly transnational entertainment markets: martial arts games, for example, can cross the Pacific from Japan to the US and back again very easily" (2003:251).

103

Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X

Exploring the Frontiers of Digital Gaming: Traditional Games, Expressive Games, Pervasive Games, special issue, April 2016
www.kinephanos.ca

In expressive games, the playability is not necessarily the primary concern; it serves the ethos, although ludic ethos and playability are necessarily linked in the context of a game. Moreover, an expressive game relies on the exploration of an everyday life problem, which becomes central in its value system. This is certainly one of the most important aspects of this notion: the ludic ethos of an expressive game presents a real life situation and the playability encourages players to experience the various ethical and moral problems/dilemma contained within it, allowing one to understand the consequences of the choices they have made. For example, in *Cart life* (Hofmeier, 2011) the player controls poor street vendors and experiences through playability the everyday life difficulties of this kind of job, even if it consists in creating a very repetitive gameplay (in this game the player has to repetitively unpack newspapers, sell them as fast as possible, etc.).

Of course, these characteristics of expressive games might be found in a wide range of games. The thoughts developed in this article are an incentive to look back at games history to find works that may correspond to this approach of ludic ethos and playability. In this perspective, expressive games will be useful to make people think, to raise their awareness or point out the relevance and importance of serious subjects in order to contribute to social debates prior to trying to find possible solutions, and without trying to persuade them with predetermined arguments.

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104
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Résumé

Cet article présente le contexte et la cadre théorique qui entourent une initiative de recherche-création liée au concept de « jeu expressif », qui encourage les joueurs à faire l'expérience de divers choix moraux et éthiques, tout en leur permettant de comprendre la conséquence de leurs choix. Pour cela, une réflexion est menée sur les spécificités des jeux comme forme d'expression, à partir du concept d'ethos ludique et de jouabilité. Cela nous permettra de montrer par la suite comment ces considérations théoriques peuvent être intégrées à des problématiques de conception, en prenant l'exemple du jeu *Keys of a Gamespace*, développé par l'auteur de cet article.

Mots-clés : jeu expressif, jouabilité, ethos ludique, rhétorique procédurale