Civic and political transgressions in videogames: the views and experiences of the players

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ABSTRACT

Video games are commonly considered transgressive for providing the context for excessive violence, hypersexualized imaginaries, cheating, bullying and other sorts of inadequate behavior. Transgressions can be linked to struggles for social change, and video games present and represent ideological materializations, and therefore it is possible to look politically at the transgressions that different video games challenge players to negotiate. To explore the civic dimensions of video games, data was collected in a series of ten workshops involving 73 participants, in mixed groups of students, researchers and lecturers of various fields of study. Analyses allowed us to identify four types of transgression - i) the transgression of linear narratives; ii) the transgression of the ideologically aseptic idea of truth; iii) the transgression of the idea of free choice and merit and iv) transgression of individualism and the myth of "Other" - that were present in the experience of players, and that can contribute to understand how video games can contribute to the promotion of meaningful civic learning experiences.

Keywords

transgression, video games, citizenship, higher education, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

Intersecting videogames and transgression leads us to consider either content aspects of the games – which may include crime, violence, sexuality – or play practices in which players cheat or act in ways meant to annoy, punish, or harass other players: e.g. stalking, bullying, among others (Consalvo, 2009; Jorgensen & Karlsen, 2018; Sundén, 2009; Sundén, 2012). Transgression usually refers to actions that break socially accepted rules and norms, and since "games" are "cultural artefacts" (Greenfield, 1996), it is not surprising that, in games, transgression reflect those same dimensions. But we have to clarify what means "transgression" in a broader sense. From legal codes to social rites, from Sade to terrorism, every culture or society produces definitions of transgression (Jenks, 2003). In a more purely political sense,

it is possible to affirm that transgression is often identified in struggles for social change. Affirming transgressions were very important for counter-cultural movements that, for example during the 1960s, challenged traditional social norms and structures that were racist and sexist. In that context, transgressing was (and is) a way of challenging power (and inequality) structures forcing progressive changes, and a redistribution of power that took the form of equal rights for women, for LGBT people, ethnic minorities. For those advocating for those social changes, transgression appears to be something positive.

However, the battle for social change is never won and in the post-truth era, we come across other uses of transgression that despite also being related to demands for change are fighting against those social justice progressive movements and can make us re-equate the positivity of transgression. For example, far-right populist movements with their anti-feminist, xenophobic populist rhetoric, present themselves as victims of what they call the "politically correct", as victims of the lack of expression and freedom and, therefore, as anti-establishment themselves, in such a way that today occurs a parodical irony pointed out by Žižek:

"Back in the 1960s, occasional vulgarities were associated with the political left: Student revolutionaries often used common language to emphasize their contrast to official politics with its polished jargon. Today, vulgar language is an almost exclusive prerogative of the radical right, so that the left finds itself in a surprising position as the defender of decency and public manners." (Žižek, 2018: 239).

In the world of videogames, this controversial tension was evident very recently in the reactions to the game Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus. The game is set in the 1960s America, in a fictional world where the Nazis won the war and invaded the US. The objective of the game is to engage in (very) violent resistance against the Nazi forces and white supremacist supporters. In the current American context this gave rise to reactions of right-wing users who complained about it being a ""politically correct" game degrades Nazis and is "anti-white""[1]. Motherboard[1] and The Verge[2] accounts make the controversy clearer. The intersections between the game and the political moment in America go further, as it is clear in the game that Nazi America goes beyond the actual occupation, the depictions of the KKK, having a black woman as a resistance hero just to point out a few.

It is easy to imagine several positions in such debate, and the political dimension of such controversy is hard to ignore. It becomes clear from the example that what is/ becomes transgressive in games must also be understood politically. Games negotiate and produce spaces for admissible transgression while foreclosing others. When they are questioned as political objects, in the most direct sense of the term (Bogost, 2006), games display ideologies and enclose ethical political discussions about what is right or fair or possible. Discussing them can be a great starting point for the promotion of greater civic and political awareness.

This article discusses transgressions in games from the point of view of players who played a set of videogames as part of a research activity. This activity was part of a funded project, JoSeES (Serious Games in Higher Education: Impacts, Experiences and Expectations), that discusses educational and civic dimensions in videogames, specifically in terms of citizenship education and socio-political development, focusing on the point of view of higher education students, researchers and lecturers. It was not initial intention to explore transgressions in videogames, but, by listening the views and experiences of the players, we have noticed that different kind of games played were transgressive in their own terms. In this paper, we highlight the kinds of political transgressions games allow to players develop, proposing other

ways to see transgression in videogames: not only in content or play, but in these political dynamics and effects

METHODOLOGY

Very succinctly, civic gaming consists of engaging others in meaningful civic learning (Keane, Middaugh & Evans, 2009), or enhancing and stimulating learning citizenship and civic and political participation in the wider scope of a democratic society (Bogost, 2006; Frasca, 2006; Raphael et al., 2009) through and while playing video games. As pointed by Joshua Miller, Sarah Shugars and Daniel Levine (2017), "[a] civic game is any game that, in some way, aims to promote or enhance people's ability to engage with the social and political world around them." (p. 139). In that sense, civic games can "foster civic learning when they help players to develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions that players then apply to public matters in the world outside the game." (Raphael et al., 2009: 203), meaning that, from the outset, they can be strongly anchored in a deweynian perspective of democracy (cf. Dewey, 1966).

The central research question of this study was to create two frameworks that could be useful for educators, civic activists and games developers: both educational and civic frameworks. Academic literature in portuguese context show us that there are too much to explore in videogames studies in Portugal (cf. Pinto, & Ferreira, 2017). For to do that, we have decided to hear what different elements from academic community, with different games experiences, have to say about the games they have played. In order to explore civic dimensions in video games, we held ten workshops between May and December 2017 with 73 participants who were members of the academic community of the University of Porto and of the Polytechnic Institute of Porto (the two biggest public Higher Education Institutions of the city of Porto) in mixed groups of students, researchers and lecturers of various ages (the average age was 34, with the youngest participant being 18 years old and the oldest participant being 66 years old) and areas of study (e.g. Engineering, Arts, Multimedia, Communication, Biology, Psychology, Physics, Education). Workshops were publicized using posters and via email and participants registered voluntarily. Participation was free of charge and each workshop had a maximum number of 10 attendants. None of the participants had known each other. Each workshop consisted of three sessions of four hours. Even though they emerged in different moments of the workshop, the civic dimensions were specially explored in the second session.

In the beginning of each workshop participants were informed of data collection procedures and of the future use of data and provided written consent. A participatory methodology (Falcão et al., 2018) was followed in which collaboration and collective knowledge construction was explicitly valued and efforts were made to create an open and safe atmosphere. In each session there were moments in which participants were asked to play, in pairs, a series of video games that approached specific social issues, followed by moments of group discussion. Although there was pre-prepared schedule that facilitators used, the participatory methodology allowed for discussions to follow the perspectives, understandings and experiences of participants in "a epistemology of the collective construction of meanings" (Santos, Silva, & Menezes, 2018: 57).

The notion of experience was important ethically and epistemologically because it meant recognizing participants as actors and actors in the very world of life (Dewey, 1966; Dias & Menezes, 2013) as well as in the participatory process of joint knowledge creation. The workshops, much like focused discussion groups (Dias &

Menezes, 2013), have become a powerful tool for data production. The research team chose the video games for the workshops taking into consideration: i) their diversity in terms of themes (environmental issues, poverty, migrant and refugee issues, labor conditions), mechanics and narratives; ii) their availability online and the possibility of being played for free; iii) the possibility of experiencing the game meaningfully in a short period of time (which meant the games needed to be simple). The full list of games, see Table 1, included games such as Spent, SweatShop, Unmanned, Darfur is Dying, To Build a Better Mousetrap, The Migration Trail, Ayiti, Quandary and Against All Odds.

Sweatshop	https://www.crazygames.com/game/sweatshop
Unmanned –	http://unmanned.molleindustria.org/
The Migrant Trail -	http://www.gamesforchange.org/game/the-migrant-trail/
Darfur is Dying	http://www.gamesforchange.org/game/darfur-is-dying/
. To Build a Better Mousetrap	http://www.molleindustria.org/to-build-a-better-mousetrap/
Ayiti The Cost of Life	https://ayiti.globalkids.org/game/
Quandary	https://www.quandarygame.org/
Against All Odds-	http://www.playagainstallodds.ca/
Spent-	http://playspent.org/
Republia Times	http://dukope.com/play.php?g=trt

Table 1: List of games

These games were chosen only because they were available online, were free and easy to be played. There was no other ideological intention than making participants engage in a game activity. Discussions were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is important that the concept of "transgression" was never developed prior to the workshops. It was developed based on thematic analysis of discussions that had been asked in different terms, and, mainly, based on views and experiences of players. That means that analysis was done simultaneously in a deductive and in an inductive mode: we wanted to see what players have to say, but we have a vision about what different kind of transgressions games could represent.

In this paper we will focus on 4 types of transgressions identified during the analysis, and present in the perspectives of players (even though players never explicitly use that term). Following Bogost (2006), more than "reinforce" or "contest" ideologies, we wanted to discuss the "implications" that videogames have in terms of political action for real "offline" world It is important to highlight that the use of term "transgression" comes from the researcher's perspectives. However, we started to notice that players found these games very outbreaking, outside the norms or, by other words, transgressive in their own terms. The idea was not to impose the

researcher's visions of transgressions could be or look like, but we do not share the innocent vision (ideological by itself) that nothing is ideological or that participants have the last word about reality. We did not ask about political and ideological visions of the participants – so call them "from the left", or "from the right", or "liberals", or "conservatives", is very exaggerated. What we can say is that there were no conflicts or tensions between participants through discussions.

ANALYSIS

Transgressing linear narratives

More than a game or product of entertainment, "Unmanned" is a kind of digital narrative that invites, through interactive art, the player to live the everyday life of an American soldier in the Middle East whose function is to control drones while looking for develop and improve their relationship with his child, but what makes it more interesting is that we see not only: the protagonist's "entering" the point of view of the drone, but also his dreams, having the game a resemblance to the movie "Inception", problematizing the distinctions between dreams and reality. In that sense, the players usually consider that game *"a crazy game. We do not know what is real or not. We do not even know what to do there. Where the game is taking us. What is the purpose? It's very crazy! "(P.).*

It is a clever chain of control that challenges and problematizes agency and the perception of reality. According to the players, "Unmanned" is one of the games that most contest linear narratives which constitutes its most transgressive component. In fact, the rules, objectives and roles of games are based on a set of random coordinates, eventually generating an effect of perplexity and disturbance in the players as well as doubts and concerns. This is most noticeable in an in-game activity where it consists of obtaining medals and whose criterion for obtaining them not only does not seem clear but is even coated with a certain degree of randomness. If for some groups the metaphorical effects of the game promote a reflexive and critical sense (Lucinda, Pinto & Ferreira, 2018), for others, as a postmodern allegory, it generates a certain degree of anxiety and anguish that makes it "playable". At the same time, this openness to "multiple possibilities" (Derrida, 1980) allows the capacity for exploration and experimentation, which nevertheless arouses interest:

"In the second game you did not realize what it was, and it was really a lot of experimentation. As much as the second game, at a certain point, we realized that it was the day to day life of the Lord and we were there to do the various steps of the day, and we were trying to make it work, but we did not even realize when it was to be talking to the child, whether it was to continue to play, to be shot during the game, if it was to continue to respond to the child and there was no instruction there to know. "(ZL.).

If some players like to explore and experiment, other ones prefer mainstream games in which they can play and be sure about what they will find out.

Transgressing the ideologically aseptic truth idea

A second level of transgression are those games that *question the idea of an aseptic truth about the world in general*, that is, they are games that, directly or indirectly, demonstrate to us that the social reality is ideologically determined, thus confronting the idea of a false neutral. All games in their own way come up with this question, but those who represented this transgression were the "Republia Times" and "To Build a Sweatshop". The first is a free-to-play browser in which the player takes on the role

of a news editor of the state-controlled newspaper "The Republia Times" and must convince the skeptical public that they should love their oppressive, militaristic, anti-academic government while at the same time pursuing ever-greater audiences. The player must carefully choose which stories to publish, as the lives of the publisher's family are at stake.

In the second, which is inspired by a very common misquotation in circles of business-ready folk used to encourage the idea that innovation is the key ingredient to a successful product ("Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door"), Is a semi-abstract game where the player has to manage three distinctive production lines in order to make the most money in the faster possible time. The game clearly functions as a simulacrum of the Marxist notion of classes systems.

In relation to the first one, the issue of fakes news and digital literacy become strong topics of conversation with some to confess as *"today, this issue of fake news is fashionable. The role that the media have in creating what is true or not "(L.)*. Almost by entering a Foucaultan version of "truth" (cf. Foucault, 2013), players came to recognize how different types of subjectivities were used by the media to produce real opportunistic cutbacks. In relation to the second, it seemed evident how the issue of exploitation at work and the tension between productivity and happiness presented itself as a hot topic of discussion with some players to counteract even the academic universe where *"we have to work, produce, and do not know if it will succeed later, if our diploma was worth it. " (ZL.)*.

One aspect that is very much mentioned among players is how games allowed very direct contact with the social reality of many groups and communities and simultaneously with their problems, dilemmas, tensions and conflicts. For many of these players, this was the only way for them to know a topic and many of them considered it useful from a point of view. The contact with the real outside of the game thus provides an informed knowledge that contradicts the skewed notions of reality and the digital illiteracy that are the basis of fake news (Gee, 2001). As the players point out, both are transgressive because *"(...) they do question. I was very eager to see how far that social criticism, that caricature of society, the way it is organized, the ideologies behind work "(L.)*.

Some players pointed out, critically, how these games were also constructed under an ideological gaze, while ignoring how even the mainstream games, with their structure and focus on competition and reward, are also ideologically constructed.

Transgressing the rhetoric of free choice and merit

A third transgression is centered on criticism of the essentialist and fallacious notions of free choice and merit evident in such games as "Ayti: The Cost of Life," a game in which we helped a family of Hawitinians making a profit from their farm in dimensions such as education, health, money and happiness, "Darfur is Dying" in which, in the same logic, we help a member of a refugee family getting water for their camp for seven days without being questioned by the militias, and "Spent", a game that addresses surviving poverty and homelessness. In it, we must calculate our gadget, savings and spendings to escape from becoming homeless.

In "Spent" game it was very interesting to note, through a material reality like money, that many players understood that it was virtually impossible to survive with what they earned. It was fun to watch how players usually say that *"anyone can become a homeless. I thought I could save some money, but I never could. It gets me so frustrated!" (A.)*. One strong idea is that the nobody is saved from getting into a bad

situation and, at this point, "Spent" challenges the fallacious notion of the poverty because of bad choices, but it is also a structural condition that affects a lot of people (including medium classes people). As a structural condition, the idea of merit is also put in questioning as in the game "Darfur is Dying" where became impossible to ascend no matter what. As point Bloodworth (2017), we are exposed to discourses that find its foundation in the idea that if we work too hard, we can get along, but what was never told is that there are structural forces (based, for instance, in family socialization or global geography) that does not let us go any further.

Economic discourses ask to us for being transgressive in our skills in a precarious context where jogs are getting rarer and rarer, but what is transgressive is to build a career and have stability. By challenging the neoliberal dominant narratives of free choice and merit, these games present themselves as a powerful metaphor of social life, as players also recognizes. Most of them admitted how games make them have *"another conscience of real life. It is important for these generations of young kids that think that everything is given to them and it is not like that" (M.).* It was interesting how, sometimes, despite some desire for change, reality becomes heavier:

"It gives me the will [to change] – but that I already had, it's not just for playing this game – but it makes me want to do something to draw attention to this problem and that is a systemic problem, it is not something that is achieved to resolve, despite all the merit of the people who donate, who volunteer, all merit obviously, but that is not how things are going to be resolved. It's a palliative, it's a band-aid." (M.)

Many players recognize how individualism are very spread across society and it is virtually impossible to change (Biesta, De Bie, Wildemeersch, 2014).

Transgressing individualism and the myth of the "other"

A fourth transgression is directed at the refusal of individualism and the demystification of the 'Other' as radically different, that is, games whose ideological core, by focusing on relations of otherness with 'others' in a wider society (Ferreira & Monteiro, 2011). In this way, we can create a social awareness of the other. Being spread throughout all games, this type of transgression was mainly present in games like "The Migration Trail", "Against All Odds" and "Quandary". In "Migration Trail," the player may choose to play the role of an immigrant who attempts to illegally cross the Mexican border into the US, trying to survive in that process, or else play the role of police officer. In "Against All Odds", through twelve stages, the player assumes the role of refugee, from his flight and arrival to his integration in a foreign country. Already "Quandary", passed in a fictional intergalactic system, deals with conflict resolution in another community with the least possible conflict.

As several players assume, these games allow the exercise of empathy, i.e., reversal of and placement of the other's place. This issue of empathy has been well-known about the conditions experienced by refugee people, making us, as Vitor points out, "to think about the economic inequalities of each country under the conditions in which other cultures live, but also reflects about solidarity", and André completes:" We are responsible for what we do in and out of the game. A game with this emotional charge appeals to the responsibility of the whole society. "(N.). The dimension of empathy, solidarity and responsibility appeared strongly in discourse.

The dimension of ethics also emerged as a fundamental issue of gaming especially in those that a decision-making was invoked as necessary since "in these games we are continually challenged to make decisions. There is always tension: what should I do? "(C.). As one participant said, "you walked the people and you could not abstract.

This happens in real life. I had to deal with ethical issues: I was going to die and had to have medicines to give to my family. And then in my family there was also an ethical dilemma: who am I going to give medicine to? To my wife, to my son, to my mother-in-law? "(B.)

Still, the games were not free from some critical objection, especially on the issue of the *objectification of minority identities* and *the trivialization of the suffering of others*. Consequently, it was suggested that members of the group themselves design a game of the genre, which raises the dimension of citizenship and participation to the very involvement of group members in the construction of their own game, which is equally transgressive.

Final considerations

Video games are often seen as transgressive. It is commonly recognized that they can be contexts for excessive violence or hypersexualized imaginaries, for example. Video games, and the transgressions within them, are understandable politically, include materializations of ideologies, and present players with possible actions that can challenge them beyond the game world.

In the analyses of the discourse of players, in the context of workshop discussions held with Higher Education students, lecturers and researchers, reflecting on their experience of playing games addressing social and political topics, we identified four different types of transgression that we believe can be relevant to engage players in meaningful civic learning. They were:

> i) transgression of linear narratives;
> ii) transgression of the ideologically aseptic idea of truth idea;
> iii) transgression of the idea of free choice and merit;
> iv) transgression of individualism and a myth of "Other".

Clarifying the political aspects in videogames, understand the civic and political dimensions of game play, can contribute to the better use of games as tools in the promotion of civic learning and civic engagement in an age when digital contexts are increasingly becoming a preferential place for political debate (Bennet, 2008). In that sense, videogames can play a transgressive role in promoting reflections and actions that challenge neoliberal and conservative forces by criticizing the foundational territories in which they lay down.

ENDNOTES

[1] https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/mbj9xv/the-alt-right-thinks-wolfenstein-the-new-colossus-is-racist-to-white-people

[2] https://www.theverge.com/2017/6/12/15780596/wolfenstein-2-the-new-colossus-alt-right-nazi-outrage, and https://www.theverge.com/2017/11/2/16594166/wolfenstein-2-the-new-colossus-nazi-white-supremacist-political-commentary

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