

Blogtivist

An Exploration of an Online Activist Game Inspired
by the Arab Spring Revolution.

By

Fayssal Itani

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 Fayssal Itani, 2013

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. Lee', written over a horizontal line.

Signature

Blogtivist: An Exploration of an Online Activist Game Inspired by the Arab Spring Revolution.

Master in Design
2013
Fayssal Itani
Digital Futures
Ontario College of Art and Design University

Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the communicative potential of video games in facilitating the understanding of the experiences of online activists during the Arab Spring protests. By pushing the boundaries of the gaming medium, activist games can embody real situations that dissidents encounter bringing a more realistic experience to the player, which in turn can communicate the dangers of blogging in the Middle East. Based on real events, *Blogtivist* is an online game that turns the player into an activist blogger who contributes in helping topple the dictatorship in power through his online activities. The game simulates activist actions and their possible repercussions while underlining the fact that political change has been achieved through organization and communication. The focus is on the experience that the player gets out of the gameplay as it aspires to raise awareness on the conditions of online dissidents in the region.

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1.0 Introduction

Video games are integrated in nearly every technological device that we use. They have increasingly insinuated themselves in our daily lives, allowing us to play, engage, and divert ourselves creating a sort of escape from the real world. A key element of games is a set of rules that need to be followed and respected. In that sense, games do not seem much different from real life in society where failure to abide by the laws might result in punishment. There are many similarities between the lives that people lead and the imaginary worlds that games offer. Over time, games have evolved, developed, and recently thrived with the advancement of technology. Activist Games, a more serious genre of games, have started to emerge, in the context of social, environmental and political concerns. As Mary Flanagan wrote: “These games are often created to address real-world issues or to raise awareness and foster critical thinking.” (Flanagan, 2009)

The Middle East has experienced waves of oppressive ruling and autocratic governments. In this context, prominent activists led a non-violent fight against dictatorships through the use of their blogs. Though deprived of democracy but not technology, they translated their social discontent into sensible, effective strategies and goals. The public sphere used new media to eliminate the states’ monopoly over the spread of information thus creating new horizontal networks of information. Razan Ghazzawi is one of the few bloggers who used her real name while denouncing the government’s attempts to muffle the voices of online communities preaching for freedom of expression. “Someone rang the bell, and then I heard Maha's voice screaming...I just

get downstairs to see what's going on and there were men with guns, with riffles and there were a lot of them...” Ghazzawi, a renown Syrian blogger and activist for human rights, describes her experience on February 16, 2012 in which she and her colleagues were detained after the raid of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression by government forces.

Inspired by the events of the Arab Spring and its impact on the online community in the region, this paper will be an examination of the communicative potential of video games. I propose *Blogtivist* an activist game that turns the player into a blogger that needs to help topple a dictatorship in power through the spread of information. This game will embody real situations that dissidents encounter bringing a more realistic experience to the player, which in turn can communicate the dangers of blogging in the Middle East.

2.0 Experiences and Motivations

Beirut 2006, it wasn't long after I graduated with a bachelor's degree in graphic design that I was fleeing my country traveling north. Driving through narrow roads, and unfamiliar territories, people were reaching the Syrian border in droves. I never thought that a foreign land would bring me such relief. I had escaped the hovering planes and made it safely. The war did not last long after that, Israeli forces soon withdrew and things went back to normal.

Later, I was working in Dubai, a city that attracted many Lebanese displaced from the conflict. Unlike some Arab Countries, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) provided good standards of living for its local residents, making it less prone to dissidents challenging the regime in power. The UAE was a place where the image of the country always had to be portrayed in a positive manner. News content was always filtered in order to show only the prosperous side of the country. There was a strict monitoring of online platforms in order to ensure that the user-generated content was compliant with the country's best interests. "Last week the Dubai Chief of Police called for legal action to be taken against Twitter users who criticize the UAE. It would seem that the Dubai Police are keeping a close eye on Twitter, as well as facebook, to catch out 'culprits' " (Messieh, 2012).

A couple years later, I returned to my city Beirut and joined a team of web designers. It was then that I got into social media. I started tweeting, and found an online community of people that had common interests. The Lebanese online community mostly

conversed about politics, social issues, and corruption. It was definitely a place where people could talk more freely than other countries in the region.

On the 17th of December 2011 Tunisia was shaken by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor who had experienced unfair treatment from government forces prohibiting him from providing for his family. Bouazizi's frustration reached its peak as his produce was confiscated by police officers who constantly harassed him. His suicide then triggered the string of organic revolutions that changed the course of politics in the region. "Digital images of Bouazizi in the hospital passed over networks of family and friends." (P. Howard & Hussain, 2011) The spread of these provocative images sparked anger and led thousands of people to the streets protesting for the ousting of the Tunisian President Ben Ali.



Figure 1: Tweet on riots in Tunisia

"Riots reported in Tunisian city – Africa – Al Jazeera English <http://t.co/HT4novh> #sidibouزيد" — Faysal Itani (@faysai) December 28, 2010. That was one of my first tweets about the first protests in Tunisia. Shortly after, my online conversations changed. Blogs, tweets, facebook pages, all transformed into news feeds discussing events in the Middle East. The people I followed collectively shifted interests to talk about the rise of the people in the region, as it became the main theme of discussion. This large number of

social media users seemed to have monopolized the ongoing online conversations. News media agencies in the region were forced to cover news stories that were of high interest on online social media platforms. There was a sort of addiction to this torrent of instant news and updates that would keep delivering and reporting the daily minutia of every day life in zones where protests were happening. Images, videos, audio recording, articles, blog posts, all were created by the people for the people.

Unfortunately, it was not all good as some social media activists and bloggers were being arrested for inciting people to protest against the government. These arrests would clearly be noticed, as twitter feeds would stop updating. The sudden absence of participation of an online activist was obvious and worrying as people started to call for his or her release. As previously mentioned, Razan Ghazzawi a notable Syrian blogger was detained for criticizing the Syrian Regime. When she stopped tweeting, people got worried. Through her stories, people got used to her online voice and felt like they knew her. The community had lost someone close to it. “Today, rumours of her arrest began to circulate on Twitter, and a tweet from her sister, Nadine Ghazzawi, confirms the news. *#FreeRazan #Syria They arrested my sister AGAIN!! pls any news to share? — Nadine Ghazzawi (@NadineGhazzawi) February 16, 2012*” (Messieh, 2012). The hashtag *#FreeRazan* soon started trending and it was obvious that she had been taken. She was later released, and resumed her online activity blogging about the current situation in Syria under the oppressive regime.

With the uprising came a lot of casualties, more than anyone expected. Syrians were fleeing their country to settle in refugee camps in Lebanon set to welcome displaced

families from the ongoing civil war. Throughout the years it seemed like countries in the Middle East always had fluxes of people taking refuge in neighboring countries. Once a country I took refuge in, now Syria is country that is overflowing with people leaving their homes in hope to find a safer place.

Being involved in the online community during the upheavals in the Middle East, I felt strongly invested in the cause. Activist bloggers inspired me as they risked their lives to denounce injustice and promote freedom of expression and democracy. I was constantly picturing myself in their shoes, as I could have been any one of these bloggers. This research was spurred by my motivation to explore different ways of communicating the experiences that activists in the Arab world go through. Setting up an online persona, spreading information and organizing protests could be simulated through a game, one that would facilitate the understanding of the experiences of online activists in the region.

Civil disobedience, protests, and sit-ins have continuously been organized to express collective dissatisfaction. In Egypt, Tahrir square (Liberation square) a major public landmark situated in the heart of Cairo has become a symbol for the revolution. Protesters built tents and took over the square as a sign of discontent while demanding the resignation of President Mubarak. This take-over of a public place created chaos that could not be ignored by the government. Today, even after the successful ousting of the president, Tahrir Square is still being occupied by different factions of the population hoping to have their demands answered. "Political change once occurred in the public space of the street, Town Square, and the plaza. Many games, some of the type geographer Gillian Rose labels "non-real," are significant because now, more than ever,

electronic games constitute cultural spaces.” (Flanagan, 2009) Similarly games, notably networked computer games have been considered to be part of public spaces. They create networks, which connect players and bring them together through play. Social media platforms and blogs also create a certain virtual public sphere on which civil societies and other groups of people network and communicate. The Internet has particularly proven to be a public space that threatens a dictatorship in power as Mubarak had it shut down in hope to cripple the momentum of the revolution. A possible game utilizing the Internet could allow players to be part of an online and networked space where organization has proved to have real effects on the ground.

3.0 Review of Literature and Games

For creating a game inspired by the events in the Middle East, it was important to identify some of the factors that facilitated the work of activists. While mentioning Howard and Deibert, I will discuss in this section the rise of civil societies and the establishment of strong networks of communication that were of great importance to the upheavals in the region. I will then explore both the work of theorists and significant video games that exhibited qualities that are essential to the study of gaming. Flanagan, and Bogost address activist games in their work as they take a closer look at *A Force More Powerful*. Galloway and Souri explore realist games while mentioning an Arab video game. I will discuss Bogost and Poremba's view on documentary games while referencing *JFK Reloaded* as a precedent. Later, there will be an exploration of the concept of Loss and Death in gaming referencing Kalstrup and Shung Lee then Chris Crawford discussing the notion of safety in games. I will conclude with Frasca and Bogost while analyzing their views on the communicative power of video games.

3.1 Civil Society and Networks of Communication

In recent years, there have been many examples of vibrant networks of civil society agents that shaped and promoted online political debate in autocratic countries. In this section, I will start by defining what constitutes a civil society mentioning Deibert and Rohozinski then will cover Howard's study on civil societies in Arab and Muslim countries.

Civil society agents who were at the forefront of the uprisings have especially benefited from new platforms of communications. Having an active online civil society is crucial for the promotion of democracy. As Ronald Deibert explains: "Typically, the concept (civil society) is used to describe those collective associations that citizens have formed to influence public policy, whether domestic or international, such as Amnesty International, the World Wildlife Fund, or the International Campaign to Ban Landmines." (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2008) He then asserts that:

The spectacular rise and spread of NGOs and other civil society actors over the past two decades is attributable in part to the emergence and rapid spread of the Internet, which has made networking among like-minded individuals and groups possible on a global scale. (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2008)

Philip N. Howard is a Canadian sociologist and communication researcher who studies the impact of information technologies on democracy and social inequality. In his book *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, the author focuses on the cultural and political dynamics and interaction between communication technology and politics. In his chapter "Civil Society and Systems of Political Communications" the author describes the important role of Information and communication technologies in civil

societies in the Muslim world. With factual data, he investigates the presence, reach and growth of civil societies online. He argues that Internet has been a great tool for the Muslim civil society as it has reduced the cost of communication across great distances to domestic and international affiliates. It has opened a platform for dialogue and allowed civil leaders to better organize, activate and engage citizens on certain issues thus giving them the ability to mobilize large number of crowds in times of crisis. Howard explains that the Internet provides dissidents an additional tool to expose governments' corrupt practices. The author concludes that having an active online civil society is crucial for the promotion of democracy. Recently in the Arab world, the Internet has been a platform where many people expressed their discontent with the current political situation, as they demanded the establishment of a democratic rule. Holding all the power, dictators in the region created unstable economies leading to a small group of wealthy and an impoverished majority. The Internet has played a pivotal role in helping bloggers find each other and collectively use online platforms to spread information challenging the oppressive rule. The Arab community was mobilized everywhere. People were helping the word getting out, and providing activists with security support in order to protect their identity.

Dlshad Othman is a Syrian digital security expert and human rights activist living in the Republic of Ireland. From a small village outside of Dublin, Dlashad works to ensure the safety of activists and journalists on the digital frontline of the Syrian uprising against President Bashar al-Assad (Morgan, 2012).

In a place where freedom of expression is condemned, having an active blog where writing is practiced without taking into consideration the government's restrictions could turn the blog into a weapon.

Creating an activist game based on the uprising in the Middle East would have to touch upon notions of freedom of expression and democracy. The game is based on the struggle of the people demanding their right to express themselves. In that sense, it focuses on representing some aspects of the fights that activist bloggers lead against oppressive regimes. Through gameplay, it aspires to raise awareness on the conditions of online dissidents in the region.

3.2 Activist Games

During the unrests in the Middle East, some bloggers have been at the forefront of the fights heavily criticizing the ruling power and calling for protests. Freedom of expression and democracy, have been central themes during the Arab Spring protests. An activist game based on the struggle of online activists would have to incorporate the notion of freedom of expression. *Blogtivist* is an activist game. The name is a portmanteau made out of the words blogger and activist. The game turns the player into a dissident blogger that has to help topple the dictatorship in power through his online activities. The player will be equipped with tools such as a facebook profile, a twitter account, and a mobile phone to receive and send text messages.

Activist games can be characterized by their emphasis on social issues, education, and, occasionally, intervention. In other words they are not purely conceptual exercises, but rather games that engage in a social issue through most commonly, themes, narratives, roles, settings, goals, and characters; and less commonly, through games mechanics, play paradigms, interactions, or win states to benefit an intended outcome beyond a game's entertainment or experiential value alone. (Flanagan, 2009)

There has been a rise of games for social change like activist games that focus their gameplay on issues be it social, environmental or political. A notable precedent of an activist game is *A Force More Powerful* developed by The International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), and York Zimmerman Inc. The game is described as the game of non-violent strategy. It deals with the issue of democracy, and encourages peaceful ways to attain it. The creators of the game intended to distribute the game to activist communities located in areas under autocratic rule. Through strategy, models of training and organization, *A Force More Powerful* simplifies the rules or actions that

activists for democracy could perform to succeed in changing the oppressive political rule. The player learns how to effectively muster and organize groups of people to create protests. The game is a simulation that helps inform the player on practical activist techniques and possible outcomes that might be engendered through gameplay. “*A Force More Powerful* underscores the fact that regime change is not a disinterested process. Rather, regime change comes about through external forces, and it always implies that such external forces perceive the existing government to be an illegitimate one.” (Bogost, 2010)



Figure 2: *A Force More Powerful*
Created by BreakAway Games
<http://www.wired.com/gaming/gamingreviews/news/2005/10/69372>

Similar to this game, *Blogtivist* simulates activist actions and its possible repercussions while underlining the fact that political change has been achieved through

organization and communication. A force more powerful diligently educates its player on how to utilize proven effective tactics to overthrow dictatorship. Blogtivist on the other hand allows the player himself to imagine possible consequences to his actions based on the information, and storytelling that he is presented with. Blogtivist does not offer a formula for activism success but rather is meant to stimulate the player into questioning the possible weight of his actions.

3.3 Realist Games

PeaceMaker is a political game developed by ImpactGames that aspires for change in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The player is first prompted to choose a side either the Prime Minister of Israel or the President of the Palestinian National Authority, and work towards creating peace, which in this game is the successful formation of a two-solution state. Similar to *A Force More Powerful* where the player chooses from a set of actions, *Peacemaker* it is a strategy game that also provides maneuvers that triggers consequences. In addition to its gameplay mechanics, after each turn, the game exposes the player with footage collected from real news stories and events in the region be it a demonstration, a bomb attack or an air strike. *PeaceMaker* does not only simulate the conflict at hand, but also attempt to mirror “real world” events. Ernest Adams a freelance game designer, writer, and lecturer, in his game review explains:

There’s no animation in *PeaceMaker*, nothing cute, nothing that someone can dismiss as “only a game.” When a missile strike goes awry, or a suicide bomber strikes, the blood and bodies you see on the screen are those of real people. More than any other game I’ve ever played, *PeaceMaker* portrays the truth – or a subset of it – both the good and the bad. (Adams, 2007)

The integration of real news was essential to reinforce the urgency of the matter or the seriousness of the issue. When the game is played, the player is exposed to images and video of real events, which brings him to a better understanding of the weight of the problem. This added layer of reality engages the player further in the game as he reflects on how his actions could have real life consequences in the real world.



Figure 3: *PeaceMaker*
 Developed by Impact Games
<http://www.peacemakergame.com/game.php>

Real news integration is also one of Blogtivist's main features. The blogger is encouraged to choose real lives news collected from RSS feeds via keywords pertaining to the Arab Spring. He will then have to repost them while knowing that some of the news snippets might have sensitive information that could attract unwanted attention from government forces simulated in the game. Blogtivist is a time sensitive game, players will be looking at real live articles and stories, happening in the now. News is constantly being aggregated and presented as the game unfolds.

Alexander R. Galloway an author and associate professor in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University explores theories of realism and how they can be applied to gaming. He describes that in games, realistic elements and historical facts are not essential, but are resources or props to add interest. He goes on to

define realist games as “games that reflect critically on the minutia of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama and injustice” (Galloway, 2004). In that sense, Blogtivist would not be considered as a Realist Game. It initiates the player on how to play the game while making him go through narrative tutorial based on real events, simulates government threats and messages, expose him to live news but does not explicitly reveal in details the everyday struggle of an activist blogger in the Arab world.

Galloway then speaks of the “congruence requirement” to achieve realism in gaming which is to create fidelity of context based on the social reality of the gamer. *Under Ash* is a game that can clearly be identified as a realist game as it successfully offers its Palestinian players with an environment specifically relevant to them. *Under Ash* a game created by Radwan Kasmiya that puts the player in the shoes of a Palestinian man trying to fight Israeli military forces. This game was created as a reaction to some western games that portray the dark skinned Arab man as a terrorist or enemy, most notable in the game *America's Army*.

“*Under Ash* and *Under Siege* are important for two reasons: first, their realism is not only in the narrative or the visual but in their action; second, because of their documentary-like quality of life on the Palestinian ground — demolished houses, checkpoints, separated families, and other scenarios familiar in the territories.” (Souri, 2007)

Helga Tawil Souri an Associate Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development conducted interviews with Palestinian children that played *Under Ash* and revealed that the scenarios in the games are based on their daily life's struggle. While clearly understanding that the game is not real, the players would feel real satisfaction when taking down an Israeli tank. Their

motivations and feelings of victory in the game had proven to be very close to the ones on the ground.



Figure 4: *Under Ash*
Published by Dar al-Fikr
http://www.underash.net/ua_index.html

In an interview with Kasmiya, he mentions that: "Life for Syrian game developers has never been better...You can test the action on the streets and get back to your desktop to script it on your keyboard." (Groen, 2012) In the region, games embedded with scenery and actions inspired by daily struggle could be classified as realist games if played by the people who are living in the conflict.

3.4 Documentary Games

Blogtivist is a game that allows the player to explore previous events as part of its tutorial feature. Past events are reconstructed and simplified to simple actions that the player learns about informing him on the gameplay. To avoid having long tedious instructions, *Blogtivist* eases the player into the game by providing him with an interactive storytelling experience that sets the mood and the context.

“As games begin to push past traditional boundaries and contexts, a new genre, of sorts, has begun to emerge; one which uses real people, places and subjects as its referents. Sometimes called “documentary games,” these works attempt to make some tangible connection to the outside world.” (Bogost & Poremba, 2008) Documentary games can be defined as games that allow the player to reenact or replay the same actions as a specific historical event.



Figure 5: *JFK Reloaded*
Developed by Traffic Games
<http://web.archive.org/web/20050328032350/www.jfkreloaded.com/competition/>

JFK Reloaded for example, puts the player in the shoes of John F. Kennedy's killer. Through a simulation, the player is equipped with a rifle and needs to try to reenact the assassination as closely as possible to how it happened in reality. There was much of controversy surrounding this game, as it seemed to transform a serious assassination to a first person shooter game. The attacks on this game were partly triggered by the dominant discourses surrounding the superficiality of the gaming medium. *JFK Reloaded*'s creators explained that the simulation is based on real evidence, and by playing the game, fictitious facts would be proven wrong thus helping in ending conspiracy theories around the assassination. Just as books, and documentaries would cover the factual data from every angle, *JFK Reloaded* is meant to do the same with simulation.

Blogtivist does not reenact the same actions of specific events, but is inspired by them. The tutorial is not the only part with documentary footage but throughout the game the player is sent messages informing him of real bloggers' arrests.

3.5 Loss in Gaming

Loss in gaming can take many forms and convey different meanings. This section begins by describing how loosing in games can be symbolized by the death of an avatar referencing Klasturp. It will then examine Crawford's view on safety and its pivotal importance to the gaming medium. In conclusion, this section will depict three games that offer alternative approaches to the notion of loss in gaming while referring to Lee's "I Lose, Therefore I Think" article.

There has to be a challenge in game for it to be enticing to play. A game with obstacles too easy to overcome could quickly become boring. On the other hand, a game that makes tasks impossible to accomplish may create frustration in the player who in turn will abandon it. There has to be a balance between the difficulty levels of a game and the ability of the player to prevail over the challenges presented to him. In gaming, the death of an avatar can result from the player's failure to overcome a challenge. In that sense, the loss of the player is symbolized by the death of his avatar. Klasturp in her paper *Death Matters: Understanding Gameworld Experiences*, discusses the notion of death and how it plays an pivotal role in gaming.

It is however, important to understand that when we talk about avatar death in gameworlds, we are, in reality, not talking about death in the literal sense, as the extermination or final ending of life...“Death”, therefore, happens to many players most of the time and is a punishment for not watching out for their avatars or playing imprudently. (Klasturp, 2006)

Video games are forgiving. With the push of a button, the player can start over even if his avatar was killed during the game. Death in gaming does not retain its original sense but

it symbolizes the failure of the player to triumph over the mission or task he had to accomplish. It is implemented in many video games as a sign of defeat and may frustrate the player but it will not have any serious implications on him. Furthermore, death in games can be seen as heroic. “Death can be “glorious”, a way to show the dedication to the group (typically a guild or clan) to which the avatar belongs, or to demonstrate that the player is a courageous and bold player.” (Klastrup, 2006) More so in multiplayer video games, an avatar can be considered a martyr, as he would sacrifice himself to lead his team to success. Death matters in video game experiences as it penalizes the player for his unsatisfactory performance. As death is purely symbolic, games are regarded as a safe activity.

Chris Crawford in his definition of video games examines four main components: Representation, Interaction, Conflict and Safety. When it comes to the loss in a game, the player remains safe. “Therefore, a game is an artifice for providing the psychological experiences of conflict and danger while excluding their physical realizations. In short, a game is a safe way to experience reality.” (Crawford, 1984) Loosing in a game always results in consequences but harm is never done to the player. One of the main attractive qualities of a game is its safety. Players through gaming may experience different scenarios and situation deemed dangerous in real life yet know that they will remain uninjured. Play provides a safe environment for the player to engage.

In some cases, video games are praised and encouraged due to their safety element as they provide release to some of its players whom might otherwise take on violent activities. As previously mentioned, *Under Ash* through gameplay offers Palestinian

players what Sourì calls “digital dignity”. She later discusses how the game provides them a safe way to relieve their frustrations. “Even if they were partaking in throwing stones at Israeli soldiers in both virtual and real realms, one of them was inherently safer.” (Sourì, 2007) When the player loses, he is always protected no matter how dangerous the theme of the video game is.

In some video games, losing is given more importance than winning. According to Lee, these types of games are not intended to frustrate the player by constantly letting him lose, but they encourage him to think.

"I lose, therefore I think, so as to figure out a strategy toward the win state": This is a "player response" overtly desired by game design mandated by the trial-and-error notion. In order to stop the player from advancing through the game too quickly and to get him to think, the protocol of difficulty level arises." (Lee, 2003)

In that sense, defeat in a game is not meant to only penalize the player but to initiate him to a better game performance. There is a form of struggle that the player undergoes due to his repeated loss, which turns the gaming experience into a captivating one.

Other games always subject the player to loss, there is no win state. *Kabul Kaboom* is a game developed by Gonzalo Frasca to underline the contradictory actions of the US military in 2002. Planes were attacking the Taliban forces in Afghanistan and simultaneously dropping food supplies to help relieve damaged zones. The player would have to move left and right catching the food coming from above while avoiding the bombs. *New York Defender* on the other hand allows the player to shoot down planes before reaching the World Trade Center. This game was developed to communicate a sense of the hopelessness in the face of terrorism that Americans faced during the attacks of September 11. Both games are impossible to win as they only get harder forcing the

player to lose. Lee explains how *Kabul Kaboom* and *New York defender* are games that do not offer the player any chance of winning. “Both games are meant to morph the player from an in-gaming loser into an off-gaming thinker”. (Lee, 2003) They encourage players to think and question the motives behind the game.



Figure 6: *Kabul Kaboom*
Created by Gonzalo Frasca
<http://ludology.typepad.com/games/kabulkaboom.html>



Figure 7: *New York Defender*
 Created by Stef & Phi
<http://www.albinoblacksheep.com/games/nydefender>

Finally there are games where one cannot win or lose, but the game keeps going endlessly. Another game developed by Frasca entitled *September 12* is a notable one where the player needs to shoot terrorists roaming the streets of an anonymous Middle Eastern town. As the player destroys the enemy, he also harms civilians in the process. As a consequence, other civilians are turned into terrorists after experiencing the death of their loved ones. "Playing *September 12th* (2003), the first shot of Newsgaming, is "chilling" for its intended audience to experience interactively the message that violence against violence brings about endless wars, as currently going on in Middle East." (Lee, 2003) The player plays indefinitely and is encouraged to think about the message that the game conveys instead of focusing on the end state of the game. This genre of games is what Frasca calls news games. They incorporate both gaming elements and news or political cartoons.

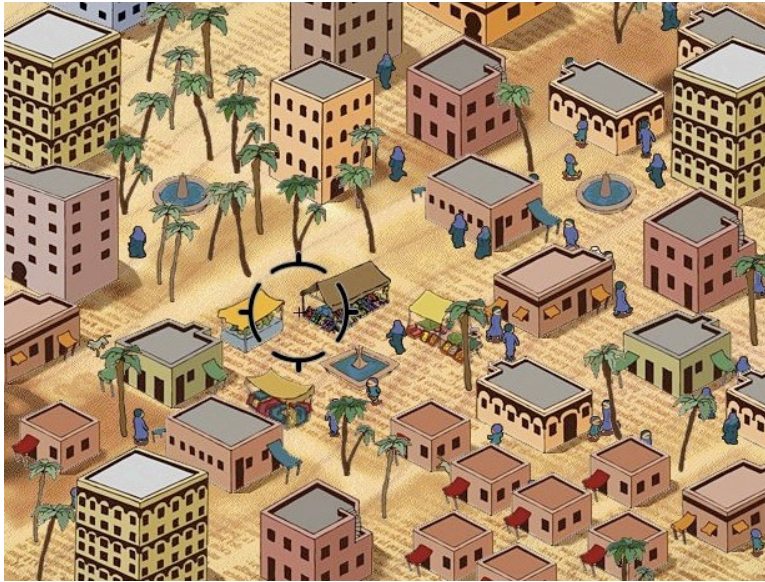


Figure 8: *September 12*
 Created by Gonzalo Frasca
<http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm>

Activist games challenge traditional understandings of what games are meant to be, as they tend to focus more on the theme or message trying to be conveyed. Similar to *September 12*, *Blogtivist* offers a different ending to the game as the player does not win or lose. The game would constantly send warnings about detained bloggers that have gone through similar online activities, but the player himself does not reach an end game. “A video game about Anne Frank would be perceived as immoral, since the fact that she could die depending on the player's performance would trivialize the value of human life.” (Frasca, 2006) In the same light, designing a player reward based on reenactment of a real blogger’s murder would be unethical.

3.6 Communicative Potential of Video Games

This section will focus on the communicative potential of video games. Going through Frasca's *Video Games of the Oppressed* it will reinforce how video games have the ability to foster critical thinking through simulation. This section will also reference Bogost describing his notion of procedural rhetoric in gaming that allows for tangible social change.

Frasca starts by defining what is entailed in a simulation.

Therefore: "to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system". The key term here is "behavior". Simulation does not simply retain the – generally audiovisual– characteristics of the object but it also includes a model of its behaviors. This model reacts to certain stimuli (input data, pushing buttons, joystick movements), according to a set of conditions. (Frasca, 2007)

When a model is simulated, the game designer collects only the most salient behaviors. Not only the artwork of the game needs to be represented accurately but also the actions that the player engages in. To build his theory on how the simulation through gaming can lead to social change, Frasca mentions Augusto Boal's work "Theater of the oppressed". Boal has explored different techniques in theater performances by trying to engage spectators in a play. The spectators are encouraged to take part as actors in an oppressive situation, improvise and to try to come up with a solution. Following Boal's strategy, Frasca discusses how a game simulation can invite a player to take part in an oppressive experience pushing him then to raise questions about the situation he is been put in. At that point, a game becomes a channel where a person can utilize in order to reflect on certain social issues presented in a simulation. "I have based my designs on the main

characteristics of Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed techniques, which foster critical thinking and discussion by letting spectators to become actors and enact possible solutions to personal and social problems." (Frasca, 2001) Activist games often use simulation in order to deepen the player's involvement in a specific cause. It is an effective way to put the player in the shoes of another person. Following Frasca's work in *Video Games of the Oppressed*, *Blogtivist* could allow players to put themselves in the shoes of an oppressed citizen. When simulating a game it is imperative to engage the player and get him as close as possible to the issue at hand. The problem solving process that the user goes through in the game will raise his awareness on the cause. Using the blogger as an oppressed character, the player once immersed in the experience will "fight back". Through threats, and warnings, the player will feel as if he is targeted and will use the tools offered to him to lead the struggle against government forces. The outcome of the game is not as important as the experience that the player gets out of the gameplay. "it is more important to achieve a good debate than a good solution" (Boal, 1992)

Bogost talks about persuasive gaming and claims that games are not only tools for institutional goals but can also lead to social change (Bogost, 2010). "I call this new form procedural rhetoric, the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures." (Bogost, 2010) Video games can embody real and fictional systems that engage the player, whom in turn will evaluate and question them. They are an expressive medium. Bogost starts by defining the term Procedurality and explains that it refers to creating explaining or understanding processes. He then defines Rhetoric as effective and persuasive expression.

“Procedural rhetoric is a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created”. (Bogost, 2010) The gaming medium offering rule based representations and interactions allows game designers to embed and convey messages throughout the gameplay. In his study, Bogost claims that video games have the power to persuade while insinuating messages to the player.

Harnessing the power of persuasiveness in video games is still a nascent field, but is slowly gaining ground as many political, environmental and educational institutions are adopting it as part of their campaigns. Activist game designers have been constantly trying to explore the communicative potential of video games. To carry their message across they push the boundaries of what is considered to be a video game as they try to involve the player in an immersive experience hoping he would come out of it affected in some manner.

4.0 Concept Development

As previously mentioned, *Blogtivist* is an activist game inspired by the events of the Arab Spring revolutions while utilizing social media as part of its gameplay. It has an interactive storytelling tutorial documenting past events, game missions based on real scenarios, and a simulation of a blogger's computer interface. Less focus will be invested on the win or lose end state, as the salient themes of the game will be communicated through the roleplay, narrative and the goal.

Creating the Storytelling Tutorial

“People who do not live in a country that is living a revolution may not know that time, is revolutionaries’ biggest enemy.” (Ghazzawi, 2012) The notion of time had to be represented in the game. An interactive timeline provided an ideal way to allow the player to explore past scenarios in a form of tutorials that would set the mood, context and the history. It would have three main functions, introducing the player to the theme of the game, initiating him to the gameplay, and acquainting him with a virtual fellow blogger. The first function as previously mentioned, would be to introduce the player to the game, as it is important to give him an idea of the time and place of the events. The game situates the player in a fictional Middle Eastern country that is under autocratic rule and condemns freedom of expression. The player leaves his reality and finds himself confined in the reality of an oppressive environment.

The second function is to initiate the player on the gameplay. As the game's levels or missions are based on real events, taking the player through past scenarios will inform him of the actions that he could later perform once the tutorial is over.

The third and last function serves to create a connection between the player and a fellow blogger that will be sending him messages during the tutorial phase. The player will receive short tips and stories from a virtual activist that will guide him through the gameplay and take him through the interactive timeline. Through this communication, a relation between the player and the activist will form. The latter would be the only "human voice" communicating with the player throughout the game. Finding himself in an oppressive situation, the player will hopefully create some form of attachment to this online friend who he learns to trust. At some point in the game, the fellow activist will be captured, and all communication with the player will be cut. This feature is based on bloggers who stop tweeting or blogging due to their detention. The disappearance of this activist might have an effect on the player that finds himself alone.

Wael Ghoneim is a prominent online activist during the Arab Spring protests in Egypt. In 2010, he created a facebook page entitled "We are all Khalid Said" to denounce the torture and killing of a young Egyptian who had exposed police corruption. The page instantly collected thousands of followers as people found solidarity online. On the 14th of January, Ghoneim while residing outside Egypt called for a protest that he organized with fellow activists on the ground. The facebook page he created became a reference for anyone who wanted to get updates on possible protests or updated on the revolution in the

region. One year later, Ghoem returns to Egypt and is later detained by authorities for 11 days. Following in Ghoneim's footsteps, one of *Blogtivist*'s game missions is to collect news events, post them onto social media platforms calling for a protest.

The Simulation

Blogtivist is a game where the situation is simulated but the tools are real. Throughout the gameplay, constant reminders are sent to the player informing him of real bloggers arrests along with the reasons for their detention. Stories and news events are presented in real time. They are not preselected but randomly generated via specific hashtags. There is no simulation at that point, the player is exposed to the same news events that a real activist blogger would have access to. Through this depiction of live news *Blogtivist* attempts to recreate a collection of feeds that an Arab online activist might be looking at allowing the player to have a more intimate look into the experiences of that activist. Notification sounds will also be integrated in the game to enhance the simulation experience.

Building Missions based on Real Event

Historical research proved to be a useful method when creating my game. Going through blogs, articles and social media feeds, I would gather information on a certain

event, from different sources, consolidate them to recreate a narrative based on factual data.

To the typical gamer, computer games are not obviously aligned with such concerns as ancient divination, psychoanalysis, Utopian tax laws, environmentalism, or social protest. In the case of activist gaming, perhaps it is thought that the goals of the designer are "real," and therefore can be best achieved with more direct approaches to the making." (Flanagan, 2009)

As previously mentioned, to have realism in a game, there would be a need to reflect the details of an everyday life. I would follow the online feats that some activists would accomplish and identify their step-by-step process. It was important to identify their motives, the settings they were in (home, internet café...) the technology and information they had access to. I could then capture a general idea of the context they were in and would later be able to design an interface that would simulate similar situations.

Many of the stories collected were about bloggers being arrested, which if translated into a game would mean the loss of the player. I would take the story, and divide it into 3 parts: the initial status of the blogger as a beginner, the climax or the effectiveness of his online activity, and finally his arrest. It was then clear when creating a scenario what would be the tools that the player would start with, what would be his goal, and finally what might lead to his loss. I later propose an alternative ending to the game where instead of the player losing or winning, he would face additional challenging obstacles as if he has entered a more difficult level.

Identifying Game elements

Since storytelling was a main component in the game, it was important to identify the building blocks of what a video game is, so to avoid having an interactive narrative experience instead. A game needs to have rules, goals and different potential outcomes. The goal was the most obvious element to set. The player needs to help take down the dictatorship in power by spreading information. Building the rules was more challenging as each mission might function differently. Still general rules were set. The player needs to use the tools he is presented with (facebook page, twitter feed, factual data...) to spread as much information as possible about certain events. He is also urged to keep his identity protected by making sure he follows tips sent by his fellow blogger (turning on his VPN). The game had to offer different outcomes based on the player's actions. That function would be central so *Blogtivist* would not end up as a linear interactive story. Cutting communications with the experienced blogger, changing the difficulty level of the game, tools and information offered all depend on the performance of the player. If the latter is not following the safety rules of the game, the difficulty levels might increase and some of the tools offered might no longer become available. For example, if the player sends many sensitive text messages, his mobile phone might no longer be working. The missions and tools change depending on the player.

Building missions from past events helped create a script for my game. My rules, goals and different outcomes were inspired by real stories of bloggers. When a blogger gets

detained once, he often resumes his activism following his liberation, but everything becomes harder, since he was already flagged as a dissident. The blogger then needs to change places where he might not have the same technology or access to information as before. The game, just like the blogger adapts to the situation that he is put in.

Networks of Communication

As previously mentioned, bloggers connect on social networks and collectively fight the dictatorship in power through spreading information and calling for protests.

Social media have become the scaffolding upon which civil society can build, and new information technologies give activists things that they did not have before: information networks not easily controlled by the state and coordination tools that are already embedded in trusted networks of family and friends. (P. Howard & Hussain, 2011)

It was important in the game to visualize this influential network of activist or civil society agents. As a possible next step, along with providing the player with real news the game will allow the player to explore the complex network of activist bloggers in the Middle East.

Mobile Phone

The mobile phone is an important apparatus used by bloggers and citizens to communicate. When the Internet was shut off, the mobile phone kept people connected to the online world. Part of having a successful simulation experience is to provide the

player with a mobile phone in order to arm him with an additional tool that was pivotal to the revolutions.

Another possible scenario to the game was the shut down of the Internet. Desperately trying to control the spread of information online, the government cut off the Internet and left Egypt disconnected. Incurring in huge losses in the country's economy, this failed attempt only made Egyptians even more frustrated thus more people joined the angry marches in the streets. Egypt's population consisting of approximately 80 million people was shaken and turned to its mobile phones to communicate. News and rumors were being exchanged. Gatherings and manifestations were being organized. Communication reached its peak. The amount of information that was shared and exchanged was tremendous, that the government could not control it. When the momentum of the revolution started, nothing could stop it. "They found solidarity through digital media and then used their mobile phones to call their social networks into the streets." (P. Howard & Hussain, 2011) As the mobile phone became the only mode of communication, alternative ways to connect to the Internet were created. Google service Speak to Tweet was launched in order to allow people to post audio tweets by calling an international phone number. The Speak to Tweet feed quickly became bombarded with short audio clips that would carry messages about the situation in Egypt. Recently in Syria, the Internet was also shut down for a couple of days in order to cripple online activity and the flow of information. This time online communities around the world posted a status on social media platforms in solidarity with the Syrian people that was voiceless.



Figure 9: facebook post. "From Toronto this is Damascus"

In a show of support for the Syrian people, netizens started tweeting under the hashtag “هنا دمشق”, Arabic for #This_Is_Damascus. During these times of siege and blackout, people from cities around the world are invited to offer Damascus a temporary refuge. The campaign is a reminder of the “From Damascus... This is Cairo!” call, that was broadcast from Syria at the height of the Arab-Israeli war of 1956 when French and British fighter jets, eager to prevent the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Egypt's Nasser, attacked Radio Cairo transmitters, successfully silencing Egyptian broadcasts. (Al-Miraat, 2012)

There is an interesting point where a past solidarity event has been translated today into a social media trend. It shows how the same message is passed on from an old medium to a new one. This behavior is notable in a way since a historical event that happened years ago could inspire a viral online trend today.

Anticipating the maneuver, tech-savvy students and civil society leaders had put in place backup satellite phones and dial-up connections to Israel and Europe, and were able to maintain strong links to the rest of the world. (P. Howard & Hussain, 2011)

Since my game is based on real events, I have explored several scenarios that I might use. Connecting to the Internet when the government shuts it off was one of them. As previously mentioned, in Egypt, as well as in Syria, the Internet was cut off for a couple of days in order to prevent people from using online platforms to organize protests. There were three ways to connect to the Internet during the blackout. The first

was to connect through satellites, which requires expensive technology. The second was to connect through a 56K fax modem via a telephone line. That technique could be implemented in my game, where the Internet will cut off, and the player needs to connect using a dial-up modem. It would be challenging to load the game built in flash on a modem but would be possible. A third possible way to connect to the Internet is through a mobile phone. Through services provided by Google, like Speak to Tweet, a person can call and leave an audio tweet that would get a message across. This technique could also be implemented in my game but proved to be challenging and would require the player's mobile phone number. It would certainly be an interesting mission if the player had to restore his Internet connection through a modem or an audio tweet.

Loss Mechanism

The player does not win or lose in the game. *Blogtivist* encourages the player to explore real time news and learn about the dire situations in the Middle East that resulted due to oppressive ruling. As the player keeps playing, missions become harder, and different events unfold. It would be not accurate to assume that the player would be detained as a consequence of his actions. Other than threat messages, an LED light connected to the game will be blinking depending on the player's performance. Just like text messages sent to the mobile phone, the USB light would act as a warning signal and allow the player to be immersed further in the game.

Safety Concern

On several occasions, while building my prototype, I had to stop and think about safety issues that my game would engender. Initially, through gameplay, the player would input his real information, and connect through facebook or twitter. In some countries, exposing someone's real identity can pose a threat when inviting him to become a dissident blogger. "In some areas, even blogging about arrested bloggers is frowned up and might result in jail time" (P. N. Howard, 2010). Would anonymity defeat the purpose of my game where the player no longer feels committed? Could this game possibly put the player in real danger? These questions constantly taunted me, as I had to think about different ways of creating a game that would involve the player in some kind of reality without posing a threat. I would eventually not use the player's details and explore building a VPN protected game to eliminate any possible safety concerns.

5.0 Prototyping

Building a game that utilizes social media and online content. I had to identify gaming rules, work around code, choose a gaming software, stitch different online platforms together, and collect real scenarios and events to base the missions on. While building the game, I used iterative prototyping as a method to be able to identify how to best convey the hardships of activist bloggers in the Middle East through gameplay.

Safety Software

Looking at online security software was a major part in building my prototypes. I tested different online services that provided security and anonymity and examined how they could be integrated into the game. Trying out TOR a system that provides online anonymity seemed effective but too slow. A VPN (virtual private network) was my second choice and could easily be part of my game without impeding on the speed or interactivity. The VPN in the game is currently only simulated, but would be a necessity once the game is launched.

Working with *GameMaker*

The first prototype I have developed of *Blogtivist* was based on 3 tasks that the player needed to complete in order to win the game. He had to bypass Internet censorship, shoot a video and finally share the footage he collected online. *GameMaker* was an easy

and user-friendly software that allowed me to build the second part of my game.

(Shooting a video)



Figure 10: Screenshot of *Blogtivist* first prototype

That mission was to be completed symbolically. The player controlled a small avatar, had to reach a zone considered as dangerous, grab a filmstrip that represented the video and finally return to his home without touching the tanks that were set as obstacles. The player had to take back roads, and narrow alleys, to reach the danger zone.

GameMaker was easy to use, but limiting in terms of functionalities. It only allowed me to build basic game mechanics, which was enough to build my small mission but not anything larger.

Later when I started developing my ideas of how *Blogtivist* would function, I realized that a simple avatar running around would be trivial. To get my message across while discussing a sensitive subject, I needed to avoid using cartoon like artworks.

Also due to safety reasons mentioned before, I have decided to drop the idea of having the user sign in with his twitter or facebook account. I needed to protect the identity of my player.

Game Jam

Participating in a game jam for social change proved to be particularly useful in informing the building of my game. In a three day period, different teams came up with concepts, goals, rules, and created fully functional short games touching upon social and environmental issues. Each time we had a functional prototype we would test the gameplay to make sure the game was engaging. Distancing myself from *Blogtivist* for a short period of time while focusing on building another game in collaboration with other people gave me some perspective on my project. My game had to be enticing and had to keep the player engaged in the gameplay.

Working with *Stencyl*

Stencyl proved to be much more capable than *GameMaker*. *Stencyl* is a gaming software that allows users to build flash games without the use of code. I started building simple games to explore the potential of what I could do with it.

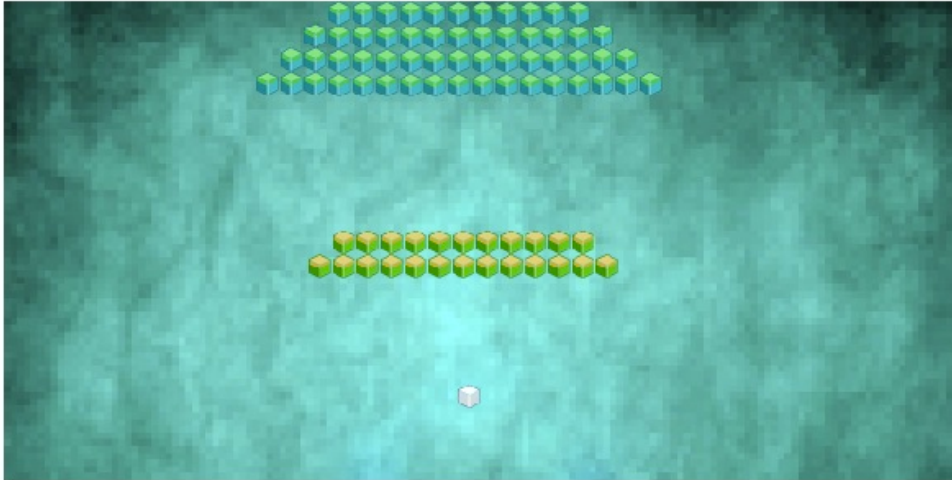


Figure 11: Initial Simple Game Prototyping

Stencyl divides the game into several categories: Backgrounds, Scenes, Actors, and Sounds. Backgrounds are the set of artworks that constitute the backdrop of the game. Actors are the elements that the player interacts with. Sounds constitute the collection of music and sound effects. Finally Scenes are the platforms where the game is built on and where all the other elements come together. While building *Blogtivist*, I had to design a game that looked like a website. I first created some wireframes, then jumped into designing the background of the game that would look close to a website. With added elements and props, the website designed would look as if the player had access to a dashboard. The online integration helped the interface look as a native desktop website.

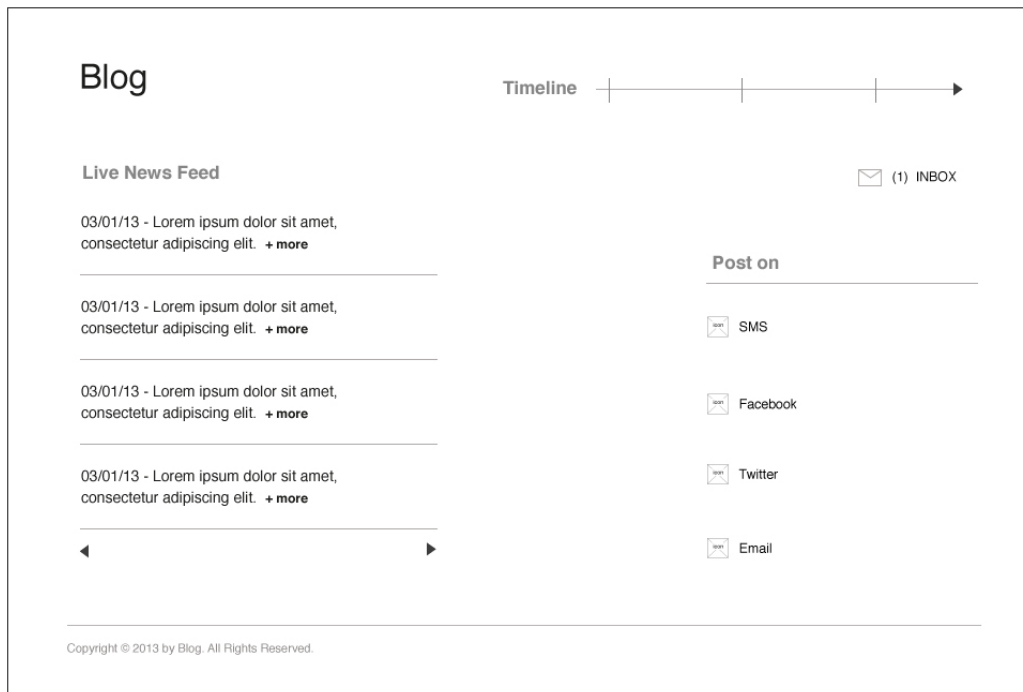


Figure 12: Wireframe of Blogtivist Interface

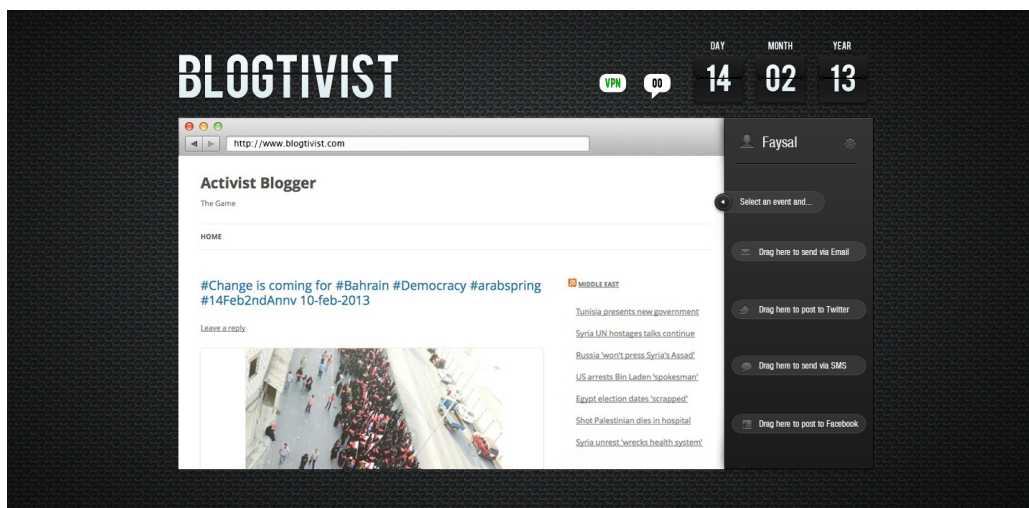


Figure 13: Design of Blogtivist Interface

Although games in *Stencyl* do not need coding while being built, there was an alternative way to add code blocks to add functionalities.

Key elements such as the date, inbox, VPN and a dashboard had to be present in the game so it would enhance the simulation. Since parts of the game allowed the player to explore past events, there was a need to have the date displayed at all times. The player would then know if he was looking at current or past information. To display date in real time, I embedded an HTML iframe into my game. As previously mentioned, a VPN is simulated in the game, and the player needs to make sure that it is always turned on. If the VPN is kept off, the game will start sending warnings to the player. Warnings and threats are messages sent to the player's inbox. Finally the dashboard allowed the player to post information onto different channels. The VPN, the messages and the dashboard were created in flash using *Stencyl*.

Working around code

It was challenging for me to build an online game when I had no experience in writing code. *Stencyl* was an ideal platform to build flash games, but I had to find a way to include some HTML components, for players to be able to use a social media platforms. Adobe Muse turned out to be a helpful software, as I could build websites without using any code. I could embed my flash games built in *Stencyl* along with parts of the Internet that were important for my game. I would superimpose HTML iframes over the flash game (.swf file) so that they would work in parallel on the same surface.



Figure 14: Breakdown of game components

Interface Design

In order to enhance the simulation, the interface look and feel was redesigned. Keeping the same elements, the *Blogtivist* page would have a subtle look, focusing on the news and images in the middle. The fake browser inside the game would be omitted so that the news would look completely integrated in the user's browser. The timeline was integrated on the left reminding the player that he could explore past news stories if desired.

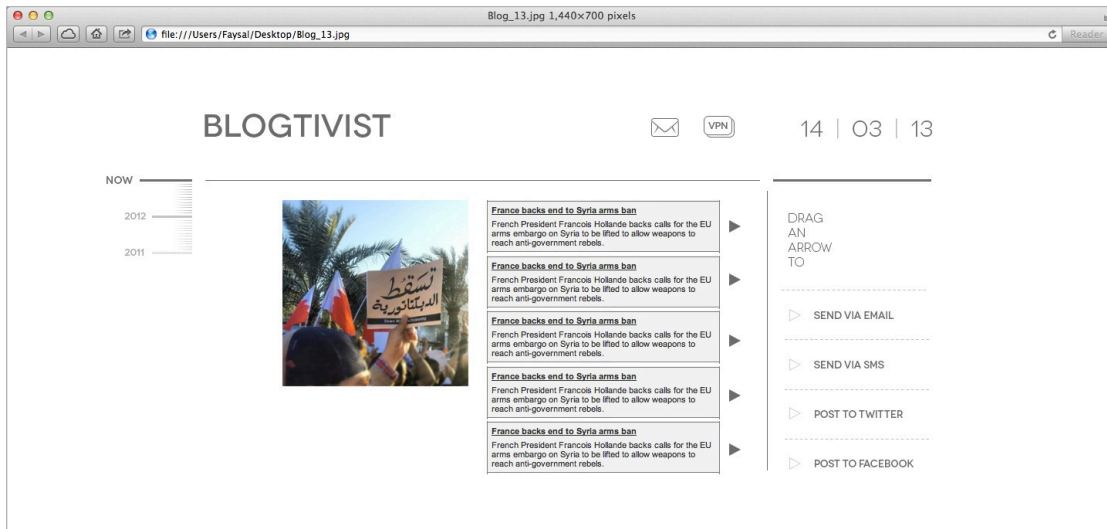


Figure 15: Updated Design of Blogtivist Interface

Real News Integration

Storify is a social media network that easily allows users to drag and drop news stories from other social networks and publish them in the form of a newsletter was interesting to look at in order for me to come up with my own solution for real news integration. The flash and HTML components worked separately yet operated on the same surface. Real news is embedded in HTML, and the action of posting the news happens in flash. Having the posting of the news correspond to the actual news embedded was a challenge. Rssinclude.com made it possible as it provided a tool to create custom RSS feeds that could be accessed through a URL, and an embedded HTML iframe. The RSS feed that I created (based on Middle Eastern news) was embedded in Adobe Muse. The link leading to the same RSS article was included in the flash part of my game. When an arrow is dragged (an arrow corresponding to an the articles chosen by

the player) to the twitter icon in the game, that arrow will post the RSS link on twitter. That link posted on twitter will lead you to the same embedded news that the player has chosen to post. The same could be done with videos and images. The drawback in using this technique is that the RSS feed keeps updating, which means the link previously posted would keep changing and updating.

Online Services

IFTTT.com (if this then that) proved to be an excellent service that facilitates the communication of different platforms online. It would allow my HTML embedding to communicate with my flash component. The website's main function was to create triggers and actions between different channels. On IFTTT.com I created rules such as: when I post a link on facebook, send me an SMS on my mobile phone. Another rule would be, when I post a link on twitter, make the LED (connected to the laptop) blink once. I created several rules to be able to give feedback to players when posting real news on social media networks.

Hashtags

Hashtags are an important part of the game as they are the triggers that allow the player to get feedback on his actions. I would implement 3 different hashtags: a safe one, a provocative one and a dangerous one. They would be associated with different news

posts in the game. The hashtag would be posted along with the news links on the different channels available to the player.

Blink (1)

As previously mentioned, Blink (1) is an LED USB light that blinks according to rules already set. The LED could be programmed to blink in a specific color at specific times. This feature of the game would be triggered through hashtags. Each news clipping when posted would have a hashtag associated with it. That hashtag would then trigger the LED to blink informing the player about his security status in the game as some hashtags are considered to be more provocative than others. The color of the LED would communicate the danger level of the player (green would be safe, red would be dangerous.)

Mobile Phone

Sending and receiving an SMS also plays an important role in the game. Through IFTTT.com, the player would receive warnings or information about arrested bloggers. He would also receive URL links allowing the player to go to the next level.

Network of Communication

As a possible next step, an addition tool in the game could be implemented: the visualization of the network of communication. Through blogrolls, I would be able to identify how bloggers connect their blogs to each other. I then visualized a network, using the software *Cytoscape* that allowed me to input data collected online. The information visualized would be static. An interactive dynamic one would be considered in the future.

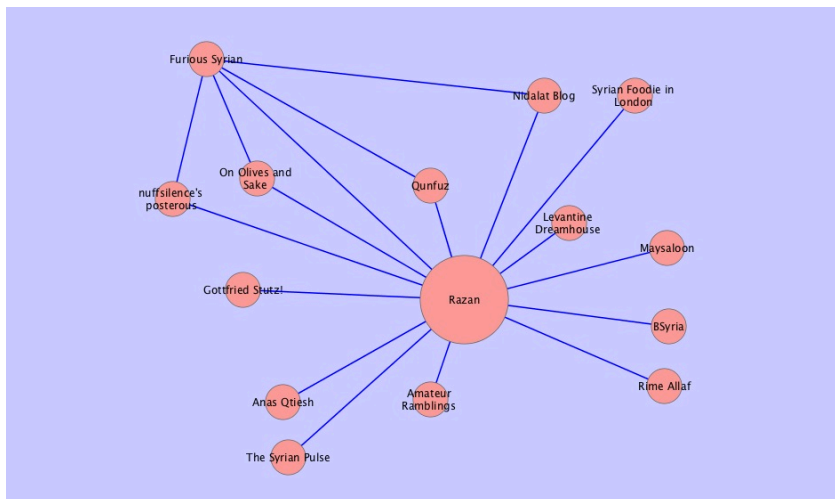


Figure 16: Visualization of Network of Bloggers

6.0 The Game

There are several missions that could be built utilizing social media, real news feeds and a mobile phone. Below is a step-by-step description of the gameplay for *Blogtivist*:

1. First screen is an introductory screen, giving a short description of the game and displaying a “play” button.
2. Player is taken to the live news screen and receives a message from a fellow blogger.
3. After the player reads the message, he is taken to the page displaying past events.
4. The player is taken through a past event where a blogger has been detained for criticizing his government. He is also initiated on how to use the dashboard to publish news posts.
5. After the past event tutorial is done, the player goes back to the live news screen.
6. The player receives a message prompting him to turn his VPN on.

7. The player is prompted to spread information by sending news posts, images or videos by email, SMS, twitter or facebook while being careful about the type of information he is spreading.

8. The game notifies the player of the reach of each channel. (Each channel has a certain reach, email has the least, facebook has the most).

9. There are 3 hashtags associated with each news post: a “safe” one, a “provocative” one and a “dangerous one”. The combination of the hashtags along with the channel that the player chooses together decides on the outcome of the game.

There are two possible outcomes.

Outcome 1: The player posts a “safe” news story on a low reach channels, as a result he is sent an SMS informing him that his news has not reached enough people, and that he should keep posting.

Outcome 2: The player posts a “dangerous” news story on a high reach channel, as a result he is sent an SMS informing him that he has reached enough people and that this fact might jeopardize his safety. He is sent a link to continue his activity on another interface symbolizing a change of place. The player continues

posting, just as he did in the first stage of the game, but the difference is that the warnings multiply since he was flagged as a dissident. The player is also sent more messages informing him about real blogger arrests and the arrest of the fellow blogger that was sending him messages in the beginning of the game.

Also throughout the game, the USB led light keeps blinking according to content that the player posts. The diagram below illustrates the different possibilities that the player might go through. Finally, all the news items that players post will be collected and published on one blog.

LEVEL 1

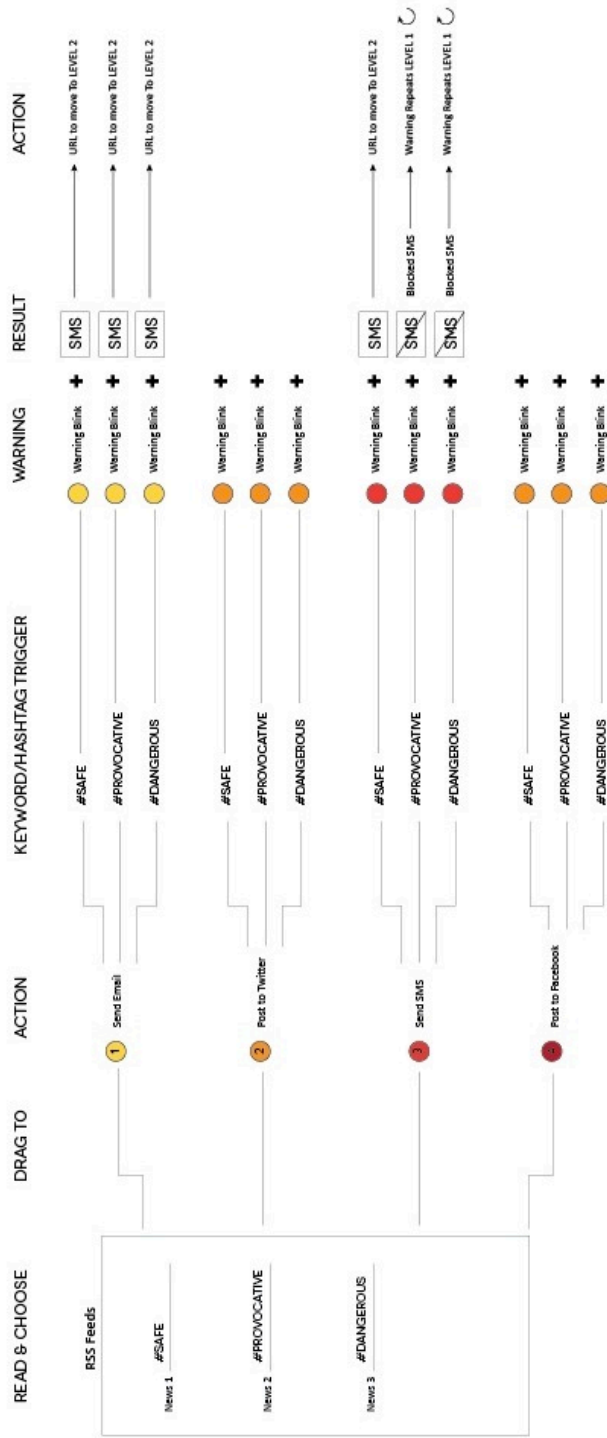


Figure 17: Diagrams of Potential Outcomes

Documentation of the final work

The user interface had to be carefully designed. It had to be a hybrid between a game interface and a news site. One that would blur the relationship between what is real and what is not. The real news integration, the hierarchy of information and typography all contributed to mimicking the look and feel of a news website. The white background, titles in black, dates and small description were purposely used to enhance the experience of the player and to make the website intuitive to navigate through. The upper area of the website displayed the gaming elements. Unlike a normal news site, there was a VPN button, a message icon and a timeline on the left. The sharing button was an important part of the game, so it was increased in size to make it more noticeable. The result was a news site that incorporated gaming elements and functionalities.

As *Blogtivist* does not have any precedents, it was imperative that there were clear instructions so that the player would know how to play the game. The instructions outlined what was expected from the player: who and how to fight. Social media channels became the weapon and there were different threat levels. Players were also advised to check their messages and keep their VPN on to watch out from arrests. After players go through the instruction page, they are invited to start the game by clicking on the timeline tutorial.

How to Play?

Share real news information about the revolution to fight the dictatorship.

BLOG

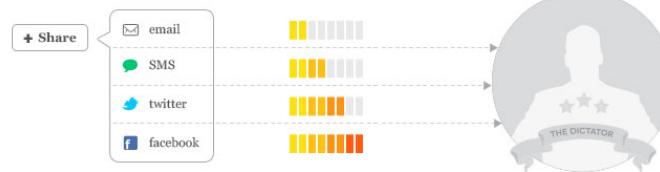
All news stories shared throughout the game are collected on the blogtivist blog.

Explore the timeline tutorial to learn about past events

WEAPON

POTENTIAL THREAT

FIGHT THE DICTATOR



Beware of Blogger Arrests!



Check your Messages to stay informed on Arrests.



The VPN protects your online identity. Make sure it is always on.

Figure 18: Instruction Page

Players are then redirected to a page with events that happened in the past starting with 2010 in Egypt. A video posted starts automatically playing to capture the attention of the player. The page is a news story documenting the feat of an online blogger that got arrested for creating a facebook page denouncing the corruption of the government. As previously mentioned, the tutorial exhibits a documentary experience and guides the player through gameplay. Seconds after the video starts playing, the mobile phone starts ringing informing the player that he has received a message. Alia is introduced. She is a fictitious blogger that guides the player through the tutorial via text messages. She

encourages the player to use the share button on the screen to spread the video of the blogger. At that point the player can only use the email channel. The other channels (SMS, twitter, facebook) are yet to be unlocked. After the player shares the video via email he receives a message on screen informing him about the duration of the arrest of the featured blogger. The player is then taken to another tutorial level, and acquires more social media channels as he progresses through the game. Upon reaching each level, the player receives a text message on the mobile phone from Alia with specific directions.

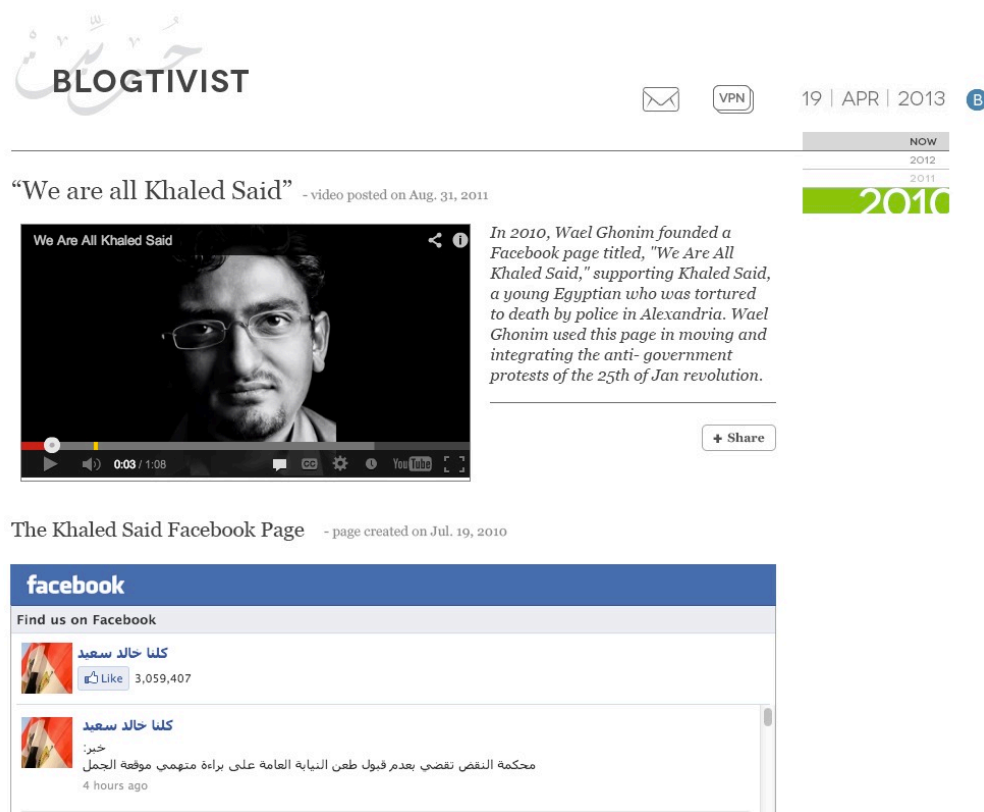


Figure 19: Tutorial Page 2010

After the completion of the three tutorial levels, the player is taken to the “Now” page where he is free to use any of the sharing tools. A “threat to the regime” bar is displayed on the top right of the interface to keep the player informed about his performance. As the player shares the news displayed on the page, the threat level increases. The threat level bar acts like a scorekeeper. The player gets more bars depending on the type of content he is sharing as well as the channel he is using. As the game progresses, the player receives messages on screen. The first messages are encouraging. They inform the player that their blog is becoming more popular, and that people are getting organized against the government. As soon as the threat level reaches a higher level, the messages start to change. The player is first informed that he has been flagged as a dissident and that Alia the fellow blogger who guided him through the tutorial has been arrested. Eventually the social media channels get blocked one by one until the player is only left with one (email).

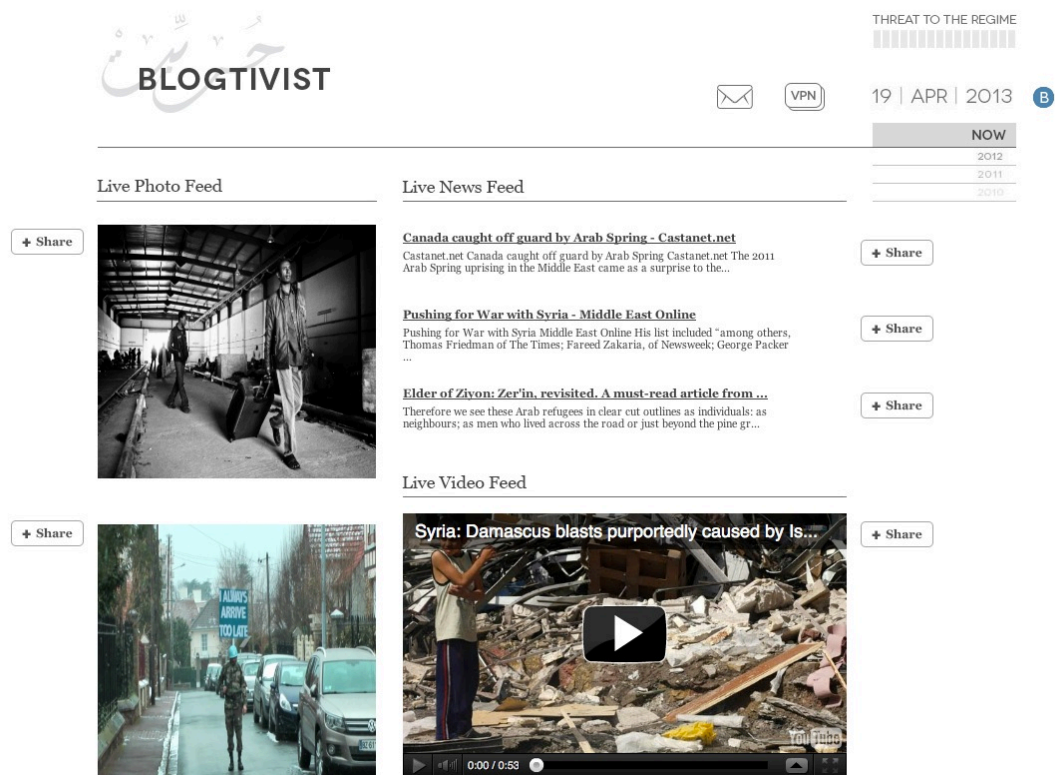


Figure 20: Now Page

Finally when the threat bar reaches it's maximum, the player is redirected to a page where he is informed that the Internet has been cut off. The game ends with a message encouraging players to keep sharing news information about the revolution on the *Blogtivist* blog.

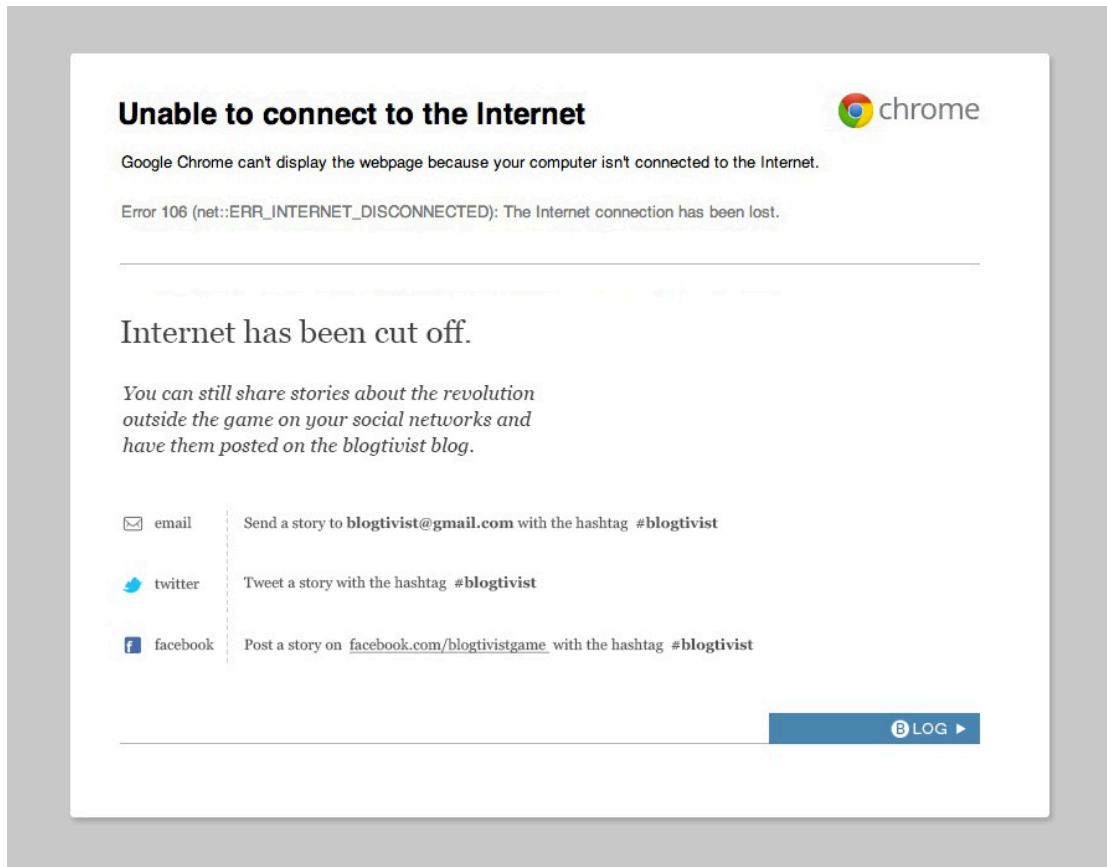


Figure 21: Final Page

Blogtivist is a game that always ends in the loss of the player. Ian Bogost explains that some game forces the player to lose in order to convey a message. He calls it rhetoric of failure. The game slowly takes away the player's weapons and only defense making him feel powerless. The end game is inspired by real events in the Middle East where the Internet connection has been cut down by the government. The player is not considered detained at the end of the game, but is deprived from his right to express himself and communicate with the outside world. At the end, the game invites the player to explore the *Blogtivist* blog where he contributed in posting news on it during his gameplay. The

blog becomes a collective platform where players leave bits of information about freedom of expression and blogging in the Arab world.

7.0 Exhibition

Created work in the show/public arena

It was important that the game would provide players with the closest setting and tools that an activist blogger would have at hand. An iMac was set on a high table to invite people to engage with the game. A mouse, and keyboard were also attached to allow navigation and input of information. Headphones were used to offer a better sonic experience. Finally a mobile phone that rings and vibrates upon the receipt of messages was stationed on the table. The phone was a key element in the game as messages would be sent to the players upon the completion of each tutorial stage. On the iMac, players had access to the blog where shared news during the gameplay was collected. To improve the play experience, the *Blogtivist* blog was projected above the iMac. The blog automatically refreshes every minute to reflect the most updated news shared by the player. Outside the game, the projected blog also served as a news feed with headlines, photos and videos about the Arab Spring revolutions. On the left of the projector stood a tall poster with an Arabic calligraphy graphic: “be with the revolution” that was spread and printed on walls, t-shirts and posters in the Middle East during the protests. The exhibited game filled a small space that provided an immersive experience with the use of a computer screen, a mobile phone, headphones and a projection.

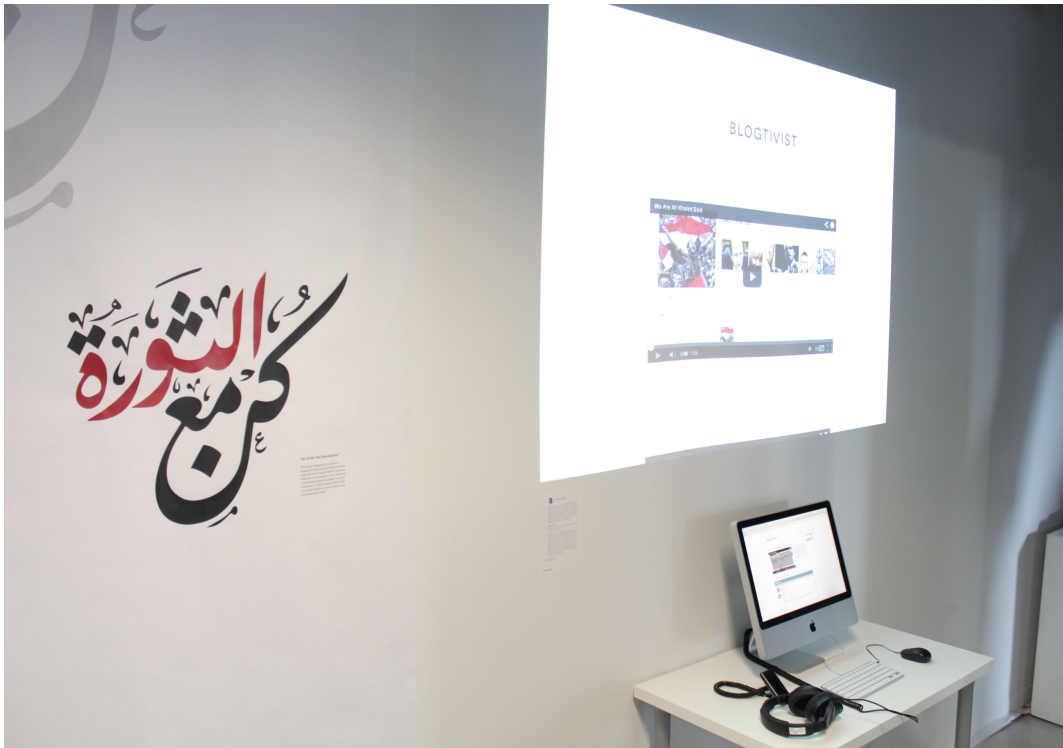


Figure 22: Exhibition Setup 01

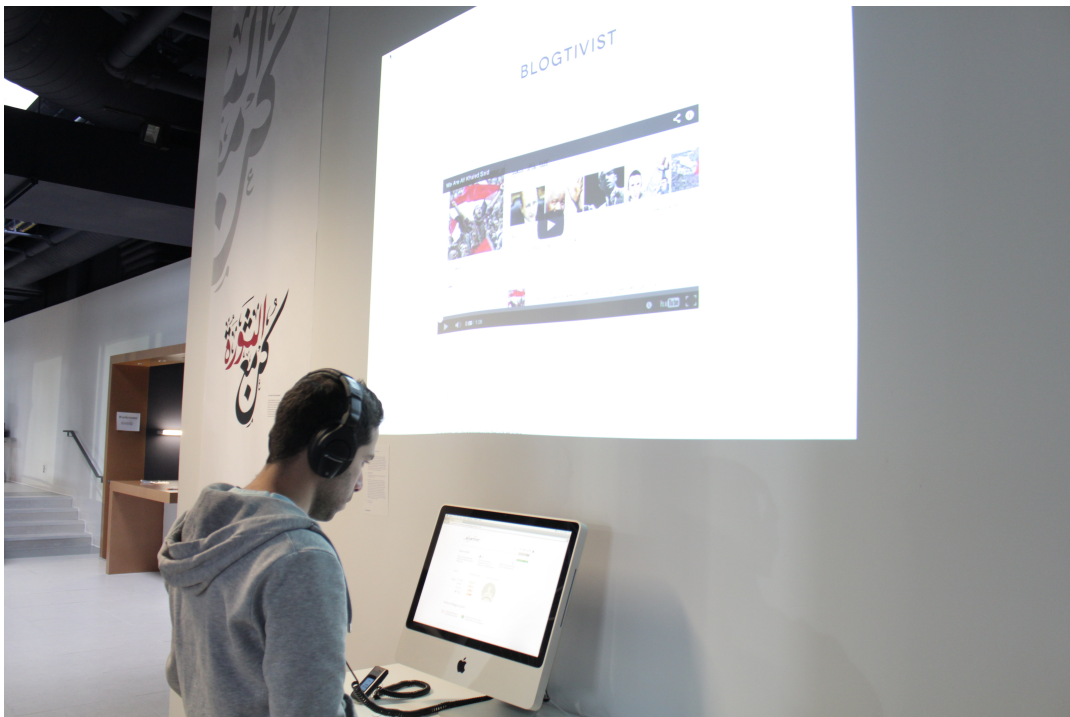


Figure 23: Exhibition Setup 02

Exhibition experience

During the exhibition, many found the project intriguing and were interested in playing the game. Trying to understand how *Blogtivist* was a game was challenging to explain at the beginning. It was the instructions page that simplified and explained the goal of the game. The mobile phone had surprised mostly everyone. Going into the game, they had focused their attention on the screen, they did not expect to have to interact with anything else. It was very interesting watching players follow instructions sent to them on the mobile phone. They would then realize that the game extends further than the computer screen.

There were many reactions to my game during the exhibition. I have recorded three experiences that were notable. The first was watching players immerse themselves so deeply in the news, videos, and stories in the game that they would stray away from the gaming actions of the game. They would no longer pay attention to the play mechanics, but were more interested in the news stories as they would watch entire videos and explore most of the links displayed to them. This reaction is not necessarily negative as the point of the game is to raise awareness. Exposing players to live news and videos about the experiences of bloggers in the Middle East was as important as making them go through a simulated experience. The second significant reaction was the connection made with Alia the fellow blogger. As previously mentioned, throughout the tutorial, the player receives messages from a fictitious blogger that guides and encourages him to share news stories. Later in the game, the player receives a message on the screen,

informing him that his SMS channel has been blocked and Alia has been detained. There was a bit of surprise, and slight discomfort in knowing that she had been arrested. The player could no longer communicate with the blogger that trained him and helped him unlock all the social media channels. At this point in the game, some players would be more attentive to the messages coming through trying to avoid having the same fate of Alia.

The third and last remark was that some players built a kind of frustration. Towards the end of the game, as they hoped to fight and topple the dictatorship in power, they only saw themselves getting deprived from their defense system. The more they fought back, the more they seemed to lose. It did not make sense to them when they realized that they could not win. They were deeply involved in the game and they were following all the instructions but it was clear that they would only reach the end of the game by losing. The disempowerment of the player leading them to their loss created a certain feeling of unease. Whether the players got distracted with the news in the game or had feelings of discontent towards the end state of it, they all left more informed about the experiences of activist bloggers in the Middle East.



Figure 24: Exhibition Opening

8.0 Reflections and Conclusion

Games and People dying

As games are often perceived as fun and entertaining, it was difficult to create a game that dealt with a sensitive subject. As I was going through blogs, videos and articles, to collect data to input in my game I stumbled upon much footage that was not easy to digest. There have been imprisonments, tortures, and killings and I was building a game. I questioned several times the gaming medium that I was using and worried that it would trivialize the cause I was pushing forward. A documentary would be considered a more appropriate channel to use in order to communicate my message but I was eventually convinced that a game would be best. A simulation has the potential to place the player in dire situations for a moment, which will lead him to react. For a game designer this palpable reaction would be the desired outcome of the game. By creating an activist game with a documentary aspect, I determined that I would be contributing to the cause of bloggers in the Middle East and raising awareness through an unexpected medium: gaming.

Personal Safety

Blogging about arrested bloggers can be considered dangerous in certain areas. “Unfortunately one sign of the growing importance of bloggers in political

communication is the increasing frequency of their arrests.” (P. N. Howard, 2010)

Someone criticizing governments in the Middle East has to be careful. Building a game suggesting that autocratic governments are oppressive and should be taken down might invite unwanted repercussions. Once my game is launched online, I would have to take precautions, and make sure it would not affect my safety or the safety of the players. The Internet can be used to help fight oppressive rule just as my game portrays it, but it can also be used by dictatorships to seize dissidents. It is important to make sure *Blogtivist* remains a game that raises awareness, and does not become a tool for identifying activists.

News Feed Value

A key part of playing *Blogtivist* is to collect and publish news. Stories posted by players will be aggregated into one blog. It will be a collage of different news events, filtered by date. It is interesting to see the value of that blog beyond the game. Other people would be able to access the blog regardless if they are playing the game or not. The game would generate its own RSS feeds based on player’s actions. Readers of the blog will realize that every image, and every news story was carefully chosen by a player and has triggered a response during his gameplay. By explaining that every post was the result of an action in a game, the blog will underline the role of news stories in affecting the lives of people who produce it and the ones who consume it.

Freedom of play when there is no Freedom

“Play connotes freedom. It is important to contrast that freedom with the term rhetoric, which historically has focused on a one-way approach of communication as the delivery of information –and therefore persuasion.” (Frasca, 2007) Play is an activity regarded as free of constraints where a player engages in it willfully. However, every game has strict rules that the player needs to abide by. These guidelines need to be followed in order for a person to participate in the play experience. This implies that the term “freedom of play” does not entail complete and total freedom. *Blogtivist* is a game where the player is free to choose his own actions yet, he is always bound by certain rules he has to accept in order for him to get immersed in the experience. Through restrictive play measures, the game sheds light on the notion of freedom of expression while communicating its heavy cost under autocratic rule.

The primary goal of an activist game is to create conditions in which the player would contribute to social change. *Blogtivist* aspires to recreate the experiences of some bloggers in the Middle East fighting for their rights to speak out against injustice. The exploration of the communicative power of video games is still in its first stages, and it is difficult to assert claims about the persuasive effectiveness of that medium. However there is much promise in the potential of gaming as an increasing number of activist games are provingd to be successful in raising awareness of over social, political and environmental issues.

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