The Persuasive Roles of Digital Games: The Case of Cancer Games[1]

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The persuasive potential of digital games has been proven to be useful to change, reinforce or shape the attitude and/or behavior of players in several fields such as advertising, pro-social communication or healthcare. However, if we pay attention to the different academic definitions used for the concept of persuasive games, and the different categories of serious goals studied within this field, it can be concluded that researchers mean different things when they refer to the persuasive potential of digital games and that there is no consensus on what they mean when they refer to persuasion through digital games. While some researchers relate persuasion through digital games to their capacity to convey messages (e.g. Bogost 2007), others focus their attention on their capacity to trigger specific behaviors (Orji et al. 2013) or facilitating specific interactions among players (Kulyk et al. 2015).

The differences in the way persuasion through digital games is defined and studied are the result of the complex nature of this practice. This complexity is not only due to the wide range of possible applications, but also due to the complexity of the process of persuasion itself and how the specificities of digital games have an influence in this process. For this reason, it is necessary to provide theoretical frameworks that can serve to analyze the use of different persuasive strategies in relation to different serious goals.

In this study I use the conceptual framework of behavior scientist B.J. Fogg (2003), who described the overlap between persuasion and interactive technology, to argue that it is possible to identify three different roles of digital games when used with persuasive intentions: digital games can be used as media for persuasion, digital games can be used as tools for persuasion and digital games can be used as social actors for persuasion. In their role as media, digital games can provide compelling meaningful experiences that persuade players by conveying specific messages. In their role as tools, digital games are designed to influence and motivate people in specific ways by making activities easier or more efficient to do (2003, 24). Finally, in their role as social actors, digital games can persuade players "by applying the same persuasion principles that humans use to influence others" (2003, 28). Fogg's framework, that is based on the role computer technology plays for users, does not explain how specific persuasive potentials of digital games can be linked to specific persuasive roles, question that I will address within this paper.

In order to illustrate my arguments, I analyze how the three roles of digital games have been used in the field of healthcare, and specifically for the design of cancer games. Previous research has shown that digital games are an effective vehicle for cancer-related

healthcare persuasive strategies (Kato et al., 305). Furthermore, it is possible to find several research-based cancer-related persuasive games designed for this purpose. In this paper I use the Re-Mission Game (HopeLab, 2014), The Cancer Game (Kristula & Oda, 2003), the Veevia Cancer Game (Wei, 2007) and the gaming initiatives Juegaterapia (Juegaterapia, 2010) and Survivor Games (Gonzalez, 2012) as examples of how this topic can be addressed from different approaches when different persuasive roles of digital games are used to promote desired health behaviors in cancer patients. My analysis is theoretical in nature and it is done to identify which specificities of digital games are acting as a tool, medium, social actor, or some combination of the three roles.

Keywords
Persuasive games, theoretical framework, persuasive technology, cancer games

ENDNOTES

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