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Anthropological Role-playing Games as Multimodal Pedagogical Tools: Rhetoric, Simulation and Critique

Petros Petridis

Abstract

This article explores how anthropological knowledge can be communicated and disseminated through the creation and playing of games. More specifically, I examine if games can be used as new forms of narration, performativity and multimodal representation that challenge dominant narratives and stereotypes, while introducing and disseminating anthropological knowledge and perspectives to students of anthropology, as well as to audiences beyond the academy. Toward this end, I draw on theoretical developments from the fields of anthropology, game studies and new media studies in conjunction with the empirical case of the design of the anthropological role-playing game *TODO* by my undergraduate students.

Introduction

In the context of anthropology and socio-cultural analysis, play and games have been extensively studied both in theoretical and ethnographic terms. Although the most well-known works in the relevant literature (Huizinga, 1938; Caillois, 1958; Bateson, 1972; Geertz, 2003; Turner, 1982; Boellstorff, 2006, 2008; Malaby, 2007, 2009, 2009, 2012; Golub, 2010, 2014; Nardi, 2009) differ regarding their points of departure, orientation, theoretical background, literal or metaphorical use of the terms *games* and *play*, and the kinds of games they have as their focus (digital, analogue), they all suggest, in one way or another, that games and play can construct and convey meaning. From their perspective, games and play contribute to the construction of culture, community and social networks, as well as to the transmission of values, information, and knowledge and, by extension, contribute to formal or informal education. However, almost none of the above-mentioned studies focus on how games can contribute specifically to *anthropological* education and the communication and dissemination of anthropological knowledge to a broader public. An exception is the documentary *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar is Me* (2018), produced by the director Bernhard

Drax in the context of an ethnographic project, "Virtual Worlds, Disability and New Cultures of the Embodied Self" by Tom Boellstroff and Donna Davis. In this work, the director and the two anthropologists combine footage from interviews they conducted with their interlocutors with in-game scenes to create a hybrid machinima documentary. Furthermore, while other media such as still image and ethnographic films have been used extensively in the teaching and transmission of anthropological knowledge, games have not. Thus, a significant question here emerges: are the educational dimensions of games limited to the supplementary enhancement of a course or a public event, such as a conference or an exhibition, thus transforming them into more "enticing" and "entertaining" experiences, or is there something further to be gained by introducing gaming into our pedagogy and toolkits of anthropological narration?

I will examine the above-mentioned questions by focusing on specific aspects of video games in general and of role-playing games of different formats in particular. My point of departure is *TODO*, an anthropological game created in 2017 by two undergraduate students, Christina Antoniadou and Thasos Tanagias, as the final project for the course "Anthropology and Games" which I taught in the Department of History, Archaeology, and Social Anthropology at the University of Thessaly. Given that neither I nor the two students are professional game designers, the project began as an experimental essay with the objective of determining if anthropological knowledge can be embedded in and transmitted through the format of a game. Since then the game has been significantly transformed, extensively tested by its designers and other players, and presented in conferences and exhibitions, such as the international Data-Stories Confestival in Volos in 2019 (Figure 1) and a January 2020 [Anthrogames](#) event held at the ViZ-Laboratory for Visual Culture in Athens¹. Initially designed as a board/tabletop game and currently being redesigned as a video game, *TODO* focuses on the construction of stereotypes and the ambiguities that surround them. The aim is to explore the dynamics of dominant narratives, along with their deconstruction, following the alternative paths that players point out throughout the game. For this reason, each player has to assume an assigned "role," such as "refugee," "lesbian," "nationalist". The way players perform the role and create a sense of identity by attributing specific meanings to themselves concerning the role depends on their interpretation of it, as well as on how the other players perceive and define that role. Moreover, players are confronted with taboo questions and moral dilemmas as an additional way to portray their roles.

¹ *Anthrogames* coalesced out of a collaboration between the "[Why So Serious? A Game](#)," experiment of the [2019 Pelion Summer Lab](#) for Cultural Theory and Experimental Humanities, and the exhibition/research [Playing Ground](#) of the Athenian-based Automatic Transmission gallery.



Figure 1. Christina Antoniadiou facilitating *TODO*, with Sophia Amarantidou, Georgia Paveli, Yiannis Gaitanas at the “Data-Cafe.” May 31, 2019. Photo by Christina Mitsopoulou.

In the first section of the article, I present some theses concerning the ability (or inability) of games to act as storytelling devices and forms of narrative and expression. In the second part, I discuss more specifically the concepts of “simulation rhetoric” and “procedural rhetoric” proposed, respectively, by game designers and theorists Gonzalo Frasca and Ian Bogost. In the third section, I focus on role-playing games and their potential contribution to anthropology. The theoretical analysis in these parts of the article aims to open up some questions concerning the articulation and communication of anthropological knowledge, both to students of anthropology and non-experts, through role-playing games. I have posed some of these questions to *TODO*’s designers and segments from our video recorded online conversation accompany and complement the article.

Narrative and Rules

Games are usually considered a subcategory of play. For the game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, “a game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome” (2004, p. 11). For the sociologist Roger Caillois, all games “can be placed on a continuum between [two] opposite poles,” *paidia* and *ludus* (2001 [1958], p. 13). While *paidia* refers to freedom, fantasy and improvisation (e.g. children’s make-believe games), *ludus* refers to games, such as chess, with

strict rules that demand constant cultivation and optimization of the players' skills and abilities (Caillois, 2004, p. 11; Frasca, 2003, p. 229-230). Thus, *paidia* is usually perceived as identical to free and unconstrained play without rules. For Gonzalo Frasca, though, both *paidia* and *ludus* incorporate rules; "A child who pretends to be a soldier is following the rule of behaving like a soldier and not as a doctor" (Frasca, 2003, p. 230). The actual difference lies in the fact that in contrast to *paidia*, *ludus*' rules can define winners and losers. This is the main constraint of *ludus*. *Ludus* provides us with two different endings (winner or loser) and, therefore, structurally resembles "Hollywood endings" and the Manichean philosophy of industrialized narratives. Thus, while *ludus* is suitable for worlds that are built around dichotomies, *paidia*, "with its fuzzier logic and its scope beyond winners and losers," works better in more complicated conditions (Frasca, 2003, p. 230).

What is important to note here is the concept of narrative. Though Frasca compares specific forms of games (*ludus*) with specific forms of narratives ("Hollywood endings"), his approach hardly takes for granted that games are new forms of narrative and textuality, a thesis to which I will return later in the article. At the moment, though, I want to ask: If games construct and convey meaning, how does this process take place? Is narrative the basic mechanism to achieve the production and circulation of meaning?

The concept of narrative has been a point of contention between *narratologists* and game studies theorists and designers, also known as *ludologists*. For narratologists, a video game can tell us a story like a novel or a movie and thus can result in the player's immersion in gamic temporalities and spatialities, as well as in their identification with characters. The narrative in video games is not limited to oral or written speech, but also includes audiovisual signs and simulations (Rayan, 2006). In her classic work *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, the media theorist Janet Murray claims that digital environments are characterized by four essential properties "which separately and collectively make [computers] powerful vehicle[s] for literary creation" (Murray, 2016, p. 72). The first affordance, *procedurality*, refers to the ability of computers to execute a series of rules. The second property of the computer is "its *participatory* organization": the fact that computers "are responsive to our input" (p. 74). Those two properties define what is called *interactivity*. *Spatiality* is the third affordance and refers to the fact that digital environments can represent navigable spaces. Finally, digital environments are *encyclopedic*. Computers can manage huge amounts of different forms of representation and media (films, novels, databases, etc.) (Murray, 2016[1997], p. 72-87). Hence, digital environments such as computer-based games can be seen as novel forms of digital storytelling and multimodal narrative creation.

Ludologists, however, claim that games are very different phenomena from narrative and are *not* textual (Juul, 1998; Aarseth, 2004). They are not storytelling media; they cannot tell stories like a novel or a movie. If we approach games as narratological devices, we exclude the very core of games: that is, their *gameness*. According to ludologists, the study of video games must focus on their mechanics, rules, and gameplay, rather than their semiotic

system. For the media theorist and game researcher Espen Aarseth, cybertexts (e.g. video games) cannot be analyzed by traditional literary theory, textual approaches and semiotics. Although they produce verbal structures, they include paraverbal aspects and act as machines “for the production of a variety of expression” (1997, p. 3). This does not mean, however, that games cannot construct meaning, but rather, as the media theorist Markku Eskelinen notes, meaning in games is not produced “in narrative terms” (p. 323). For Eskelinen, ludologists’ focus lies in “locating and theorizing indisputable formal differences between games and other cultural artefacts and means of expression (such as films, drama, toys, and written narratives)” (p. 322).

Simulation Rhetoric and Procedural Rhetoric

This tension between narrative and rules, semiotic and representational characteristics on the one hand and the program (software), on the other, is bridged to a certain extent through the concept of *rhetoric*. Gonzalo Frasca argues that if we assume video games can convey meaning—that is the ideas and feelings of an author—they do it in a very different way than “traditional” media. While “traditional” media are representational, games are simulational (Frasca, 2003, p. 222-225). The rhetoric of games, what he calls *simulation rhetoric*, has different qualities than narrative rhetoric and representation. A photograph of an airplane can convey information about its color and shape, but the plane will never fly due to the interaction between the viewer and the medium. In a movie, landing a plane is a narrative, but the viewer cannot influence this process. On the contrary, in a simulation, the system models behaviours that can be modified by the player (p. 223-224): “simulations are laboratories for experimentation where user action is not only allowed but also required” (p. 229). As a result, simulations “can express messages in ways that narrative simply cannot, and vice versa” (p. 225). Furthermore, for Frasca, the narrative is the form of the past, of what has already happened and cannot be changed, while drama is the form of what is happening now, the form of the present. Simulation, by contrast, is the form of the *future* that deals “with what may happen” (p. 233). The simulation creates possibilities for future change. Significantly, Frasca suggests that simulation can also exist in non-electronic devices such as toys (p. 223).

A similar concept is Ian Bogost’s *procedural rhetoric*. He defines procedural rhetoric as “the practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images in a convincing way. Procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes. [...] its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behaviour, the construction of dynamic models.” (2007, p. 28-29). Procedural rhetoric as a concept illuminates how people can learn not through oral or visual rhetoric but through rules and processes composed by game designers. Those rules and processes set up an environment with allowances and prohibitions for the players; they define what players can do and what they cannot. As in the case of oral rhetoric, in procedural rhetoric, one tries to express ideas and emotions, construct and convey meaning, articulate arguments, and convince others. Procedural

rhetoric is “the art of persuasion through rule-based representation and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images or moving pictures” (2007, p. ix).

Following Murray who suggests that procedural authoring “means writing the rules by which the text appears as well as writing the texts themselves” (Murray, 2016[1997] cited in Bogost, 2007, p. 10), Bogost claims that this type of rhetoric and persuasion is tied to computers. “To write procedurally, one authors code that enforces rules to generate some kind of representation, rather than authoring the representation itself” (2007, p. 4). This form of representation “is a form of symbolic expression that uses process rather than language” and, thus “requires inscription in a medium that actually enacts processes rather than merely describes them” (2007, p. 9). While Bogost chiefly focuses on programming in the context of video games, he suggests that humans can also enact processes (as Frasca claims that simulation also exists in nonelectronic devices). Analog board and card games, for instance, involve human-enacted processes, as players must execute the rules of the games they play. However, in comparison to the computer, it is extremely difficult for human actors to constantly execute the same process without rest and incentive (2007, p. 10).

Furthermore, in contrast to other forms of rhetoric, in the case of gaming there is no one-way transfer of meaning from the sender to the receiver due to interactivity. At the same time, non-linearity (the different paths a player can follow) opens up “possibility spaces” based on players interactions and choices “that can be explored through play” (2007, p. 122). Here lies a significant difference between *persuasive* games and *serious* games. Serious games are designed with a main objective other than entertainment (e.g. educational or political purposes). However, serious games “support already existing and established interests of political, corporate, and social institutions” by translating them into video games (2007, p. 57). On the contrary, for Bogost, persuasive games promote “dialectical interrogation of process-based claims about how real-world processes do, could, or should work” (2007, p. 57), and thus can destabilize fixed views and pre-established knowledge of institutions. Nonetheless, by emphasizing the authoring of processes, Bogost seems to privilege designers instead of players. The array of players’ choices is highly predetermined by the designers. Intentionally or unintentionally, designers include specific elements, rules, processes, and features in a game whilst excluding others. Thus, procedural rhetoric reflects designers’ ideology about how the world works and the point of the game is for players to grasp their point of view.

Bringing in the player

Of course, one could claim that given that video games are dominated by images, sounds, moving pictures, oral and written narratives, and rhetoric, they are the quintessence of the multimodal. Whilst this may be partially true, I would like to make two claims here. Firstly, those signs (images, sounds, etc.) are produced by processes. Secondly, there are two different levels of narrative. For the new media theorist Lev Manovich, in contrast to novel

and cinema, “many new media objects do not tell stories; they don't have a beginning or end” (2001, p. 218). Games, to a certain extent, are experienced as narratives by the players; a game could inform a player that she is a soldier who has to fight her way to a base to destroy her enemies and save people. However, this is a narrative shell that “masks a simple algorithm familiar to the player”: kill the enemies on the current level, collect all treasures and repeat this process until you reach the final level (2001, p. 222).

Games include linear narratives produced via cinematics, oral or written speech, images, etc., but at the same time include “nonlinear narratives that must unfold in algorithmic form during gameplay” (Galloway, 2006, p. 92). Media theorist and computer programmer Alexander Galloway also underlines the aspect of “action”. We saw that for Murray, Bogost, and Frasca, video games are a participatory medium; they demand the player's action and performance. Galloway draws on the symbolic anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (1973) notion of culture as an “acted document,” which entails that “culture is a document, a text that follows the various logics of a semiotic system” (2006, p. 14). Nevertheless, by drawing on this textual metaphor, the idea of culture as an acted “document” distinguishes culture from other “nonacted semiotic systems” and non-“action-based media” (2006, p. 14). For Galloway, action-based texts (e.g. video games) are executable, while traditional texts are not, a thesis that reminds us of Aarseth's analysis of cybertexts. Hence, from the perspective of semiotics, an error in a traditional text is very different from one in an algorithmic text. As Galloway notes, “a false move or an incident of cheating in a game will essentially invalidate the game from that point onward” (2009, p. 146).

Though in the above-mentioned approaches players are not ignored, the analyses mainly (if not solely) focus on the interactivity between the player and the rule-bounded system, probably because most examples are derived from single-player games. The sociocultural interactivity *among players*, as in MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games), is not taken into account. Bogost's approach has received criticism for trivializing players' possibilities to dynamically alter specific aspects of a game, even its rules. Designers' ideology seems to be overpowering and almost deterministic regarding players' behaviour. For the video game researcher Miguel Sicart, “ignoring the player means ignoring the single most important ethical and political, and creative element of the game: the values and opinions and cultural presence of the player who engages in play” (2011).

Similarly, the anthropologist Thomas Malaby defines a game as “a semibounded and socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes”, and emphasizes the sociocultural context rather than the inherent features of games (2007, p. 96). Although he suggests that games are *processual*, the meaning of process in this case is quite different from Bogost's use of the term. It means that games can change in the course of the playing process (2007, p. 102). *Unpredictability* is also a key term for Malaby because players can alter the rules and outcomes of a game (either intentionally or unintentionally). For the anthropologist Tom Boellstorff, game cultures cannot be merely reduced to their platforms and rules; they should be examined either by focusing on the relation between the

gameworld and the physical world or in their own terms, that is, “as coherent systems of meaning and practice in themselves” (2006, p. 33).

One can suggest that rule transformation can take place only in non-digital games where rules and processes are not encoded in a game engine by the designers. This is far from true. For instance, in World of Warcraft (WoW) where my ethnographic research took place, *theorycrafting* (“the attempt to mathematically analyze game mechanics in order to gain a better understanding of the inner workings”² of the game and optimize players’ performance) and *modification* (the partial or total alteration of a game) are well-established practices. Theorycrafters and modders are players who dynamically explore the algorithmic universe of the game; they can manipulate and even change the rules (or at least push the designers to change them) and add content to the game. Theorycrafters, according to the media theorist Faltin Karlsen (2011), are players who admire technology, programming and data mining. Thus, their cultural background plays a significant role in the alteration of the game. These alterations must also take place in a procedural manner. In order for the modders to alter parts of the game, they have to author and/or re-author processes. However, specific rules of the game can be manipulated through other, non-procedural practices. MMO’s players can communicate with each other through “traditional” forms of narrative (oral or written speech); they can also construct social relationships, communities and networks that are defined by socio-cultural conventions and shared meanings and practices. These conventions can also change players’ practices concerning the procedural rules of the game. Legal rules (such as a company’s Terms of Service) impose another level of rules. Whilst the terms of service in games such as WoW prohibit the use of racist or sexist discourse, the procedural rules do not; there is no automated system that prevents the use of offensive language in the chat window. Moreover, while the Terms of Service and the game rules permit monetary transactions (using in-game currency) between players, in specific contexts such as in a guild (a network of players within the larger community), players might prohibit this practice and stipulate that transactions be non-monetary. Thus, here we have three different sets of often conflicting rules (cultural, rules of the game, legal), which play a significant role in “persuading” players regarding how the world works or *should* work.

Role-playing games, anthropology and socio-cultural critique

Some important aspects of game and narrative discussed up until this point include the issue of whether games can communicate meaning and articulate specific forms of rhetoric and argument through simulation, processes and rules. Social conventions and traditional forms of narrative and rhetoric also play an important role, and their dynamic depends both on the format/materiality of the game and the players. We have also seen how, in contrast to other media formats and forms of expression, games always demand players’ performativity and action. Compared to conventional media forms, a theoretically informed use of game in anthropology can offer a more experiential and phenomenological approach to teaching and

² <https://wowwiki.fandom.com/wiki/Theorycraft>

disseminating anthropological knowledge to non-anthropologist-players, even facilitating the co-production of anthropological knowledge. Though the focus of the studies I have discussed so far in this article is on digital games, to a certain extent, procedural rhetoric and simulational theory are also applicable to analog games. In non-digital games, the transformation of rules is not necessarily procedural, given that players can change the rules through discussion, conflict and convention³. Players can transform the rules of a digital game too—as we saw in the case of *WoW*—through a process that takes place across different levels of rules (procedural, cultural, etc.).

I now turn to the question of whether the aforementioned aspects of games be generative for the presentation and communication of anthropological knowledge? Can these processes contribute to the cultivation of critical anthropological thinking? In this final section, I will explore these questions with reference to the game *TODO*, a tabletop role-playing game inspired by the anthropologist Matthew Durlington’s card game *Cards Against Anthropology*⁴, for which the rules are as follows. First, all players have to pick a role card (Figure 2) which they keep secret during the game. Based on the role card, each must enact a corresponding identity (e.g. woman, queer, conservative, anarchist, etc.). The players can freely move on the board according to the cast of the die. Whenever a pawn reaches a white, black or red tile, the player has to pick a card of the same color. The white cards are “challenges” (Figures 3 & 4) that include questions and answers related to topics that are considered taboo and involve ethical decisions. The black cards are one-word “characteristics” (Figures 5, 6, 7), additional attributes that the players either accept or reject to enhance their identity performance. Finally, the red cards entitled “TODO” oblige players to commit certain acts, such as drawing a challenge card (to which all players answer), or exchanging a characteristic card with another player. During the course of the game, each player tries to figure out the identity of the others. The game finishes when the players reach a mutual consensus. There is no winner or loser (video 1).



Figure 2. A *TODO* role card that reads “Migrant.”

³ For Bogost, in a hide-and-seek game, an older child can choose to count for a longer time in order to give the younger children a chance to hide more adequately. A “rule that is not merely instrumental [but] it suggests a value of equity in the game and its players” (2008, p. 121).

⁴ <https://www.anthropologygames.com/cards-against-anthropology>

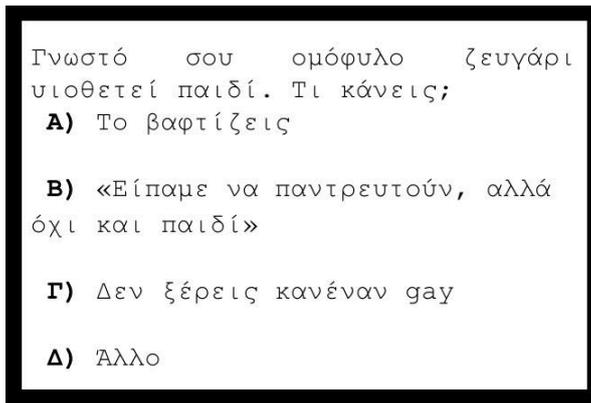


Figure 3. A TODO challenge card that reads: A gay couple whom you know adopts a child? a. You baptize the child b. “It was okay for them to marry, but a child is too much!” c. You don’t know any gay people. d. Other

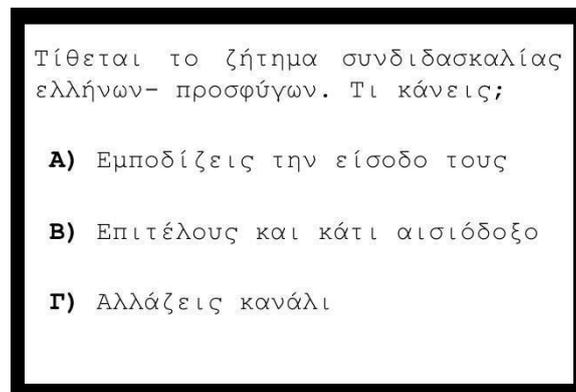


Figure 4. A TODO challenge card that reads: The issue of teaching refugees and Greeks together comes up. a. You block their entrance b. At last something positive c. Change the channel



Figure 5: A TODO “characteristics” card that reads: “Nationalism”.



Figure 6: A *TODO* “characteristics” card that reads: “Atheism”.



Figure 7: A *TODO* “characteristics” card that reads: “Activism”.

Role-playing games (RPGs) can be differentiated into four types: Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), such as *WoW*; single-player computer Role-Playing Games; pen-and-paper (PNP) or table-top role-playing games which “tend to be more told than enacted”; and live-action role-playing games (LARP) which are usually “played with a large group of people who physically enact their roles and dress up for the occasion” in different spatialities such as factories and forests (Dormans, 2006). An RPG, as a structure that can be implemented using different media (voice for tabletops, bodily expressions for LARPs) is multimodal (Kim, 2004, p. 33). It can also be conceived as a method of expression and performing art, but in contrast to what Kim calls “static media” (novel, film), as well as in contrast to theater, and traditional forms of storytelling and narrative, in RPGs each player “is simultaneously audience and actor” in that they watch other players, and author and perform their own character (Kim, 2004, p. 33, 35). For the game designer and scholar Markus Montola (2003), role-playing differs from other forms of art and static media⁵ of expression in that RPGs consist of participatory and interactive diegeses of narratives. In a movie, we have a subjective diegesis by the narrator, while in RPGs we have intersubjective production of several diegeses by the players. Each player

⁵ The term “static media” used by Kim and Montola is reminiscent of Galloway’s distinction (2006) between “acted” and “nonacted” semiotic systems and “action-based” and “non-action-based” media.

assumes a different character, a different path through the experience of playing the game and different perceptions of the rules and the constructed universe, thus rendering players co-creators of the game universe (Stenros & Montola 2011, p. 4). Therefore, “the core process of role-playing is the creation and interaction of diegeses by all participants” (Loponen & Montola 2004, p. 40).

Please see HTML version for accompanying video content

Video segment of online interview of the author, Christina Antoniadou and Thasos Tanagias discussing the rules of *TODO*.

Given the above, games can serve as a significant resource for the communication of anthropological knowledge for several reasons. Provided that games can construct and convey meaning, be used as vehicles of expression, and function as specific forms of rhetoric, they can adequately articulate arguments in various forms. In the case of a tabletop RPG like *TODO*, forms of narrative and rhetoric during the game are conventional. While playing the game, players talk to each other describing their identities. At the same time, the game is constructed by using other symbols and materials (cards with written text, board, colors, dice). Its mechanics and rules, along with oral narrative, rhetoric and visual symbols, also play an important role by acting as arguments and defining spaces of possibility. For instance, the fact that the dice ultimately play a trivial role in *TODO* (the players can freely move on the playing board) suggests that luck might play a minor role in the (de)construction of stereotypes (Video 2). The fact that each player performs their identities through intersubjective diegeses also can be seen as an argument that identity construction is not reducible to individual agency and narrative; it is not simply a matter of personal choice but depends on the narratives, perceptions, signification and agency of others as well.

Please see HTML version for accompanying video content

Video segment of online interview of the author, Christina Antoniadou and Thasos Tanagias discussing the role of luck and the board in *TODO*.

What is also important here is that students or other players (non-anthropologists) are actively involved in the production of meaning through intersubjective multimodal narrative and rhetorical conflicts, as opposed to traditional teaching practices where the transmitter/professor tends to convey to the recipient/student an already structured and fixed narrative. The concept of simulation is also important. As Frasca claims, a major characteristic of simulation is that it requires users' participation (2003, p. 229). The RPG designer Elge Larsson claims that “it is not far from true to say that role-playing is the primal

way of learning and that all higher education should start from there” (2004, p. 243). Larsson also suggests that contrary to most traditional forms of education, simulation could make students ask important questions to themselves, think through parallels between simulation and reality and consider how to cope with the problems presented through simulation; in this way, critical analysis is fostered, leading students to create their own theoretical models (2004, p. 243-244). The fact that games demand participation by the players-students, that the borderline between author and audience is destabilized (or even disappears) and that the construction of meaning is a cooperative process, blurs traditional hierarchies between teachers/students and experts/non-experts while also creating the potential conditions for the emergence of a more participatory educational process.

Furthermore, *TODO* is designed with rules that do not define winners and losers, in order to avoid clear-cut schemes and give its players more space to follow different paths without trying to win. *TODO*'s designers claim that although they wanted the players to think critically and perform their identities through their characters during and after the playful experience, they did not want to overuse pre-established anthropological knowledge (as happens in serious games) in order to persuade the players. They wanted to pose specific dilemmas and taboos in order to create the proper conditions for problematization by avoiding persuasion and instrumental didacticism (as in persuasive games) (Video 3). Hence, the designers' main goal was to provide a framework within which players would be able to express their views, stereotypical or not, by interacting with the processes of the game. They also wanted to receive feedback from many players in order to optimize *TODO*, a game that has been significantly changed since its initial conception.

Please see HTML version for accompanying video content

Video segment of online interview with the author, Christina Antoniadou and Thasos Tanagias discussing didacticism and problematization in 'serious' games like *TODO*.

The student-designers' interventions are aligned with the artist and game designer Mary Flanagan's (2009) view on what she calls "critical play". Flanagan suggests:

critical play means to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life. These questions can be abstract, such as rethinking cooperation, or winning, or losing; or concrete, involved with content issues such as looking at the U.S. military actions in Cambodia in the early 1970s. Criticality in play can be fostered in order to question an aspect of a game's "content," or an aspect of a play scenario's function that might otherwise be considered a given or necessary. Criticality can provide an essential viewpoint or an analytical framework (2009, p. 6).

Thus a critical design methodology should be based on a non-hierarchical and participatory exchange between the designers and a heterogeneous audience of testers (2009, p. 256-258). Specifically RPGs “can portray any world or society imaginable” (Montola, 2010, p. 25) and be used as tools for studying what worlds are possible, how the world is, how it should or could be, and imagining alternatives for our world (utopian or dystopian). Hence, “the compelling experiences of both utopian and dystopian ideas that such simulations offer are why RPGs lends itself so easily to critical play” (Montola, 2010, p. 25).

A significant question emerges here: what is the proper balance (the “parallels” in Larsson’s terms) between the simulation and the world that is portrayed by it? Caillois claims that in competitive games “equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions” (2001[1958], p. 14). Although *TODO* is not a competitive game, and despite the fact that during the public testing events no players questioned issues of equality, one might ask concerning its rules: should all players be granted the same abilities to articulate discourse concerning their roles? The rules of *TODO* are the same for everyone and thus power asymmetries seem to be absorbed. In our daily lives, however, this is not the case. In this sense, the simulation might seem quite utopian. Would an asymmetrical game design, in which different roles have different opportunities to articulate discourse and perform their roles, have been a more appropriate choice? The two designers avoided this option because they felt that the attribution of different predetermined abilities to different roles would have led to the narrowing down of the possibility spaces. To the contrary, they believed that asymmetries of power relations, as well as their management, should emerge from the players’ performativity and expression (stereotypical or not) and the playing process itself.

A critical game can also contribute to a preeminently anthropological kind of work: namely, the problematization of the familiar and the immersion in an unfamiliar alternate condition. It can thus contribute to placing the players’ self in the position of otherness, creating a condition of empathy and transforming their subjectivity. For the LARP artist and researcher Martin Ericson (2004), who approaches RPGs through the analytical lens of performance studies, the three stages of separation, transition and integration that have been coined by Arnold van Gennep and further developed by Victor Turner resemble the processes of role-playing. “By putting their societal roles aside and accepting new ones the participants make ready to cross into the main part of the role-playing rite, the liminal or transitional phase” (Ericson, 2004, p. 20). They can then enter the liminal phase (the part of playing the game) and, finally, return through the integration process as different subjects with different statuses (Video 4).

Please see HTML version for accompanying video content

Video segment of online interview with the author, Christina Antoniadou and Thasos Tanagias discussing “fun” in *TODO*.

One final significant aspect of using role-playing games for the articulation and transmission of anthropological meaning and knowledge is the idea of *fun*. Is it necessary for an anthropological game to always be fun? *TODO* creators try to inscribe the element of fun in their game to make it engaging (Video 5). Nonetheless, if a game is not reducible to its rules and its authors’ intentions but rather to the intersubjective communication and participation of its players and their cultural background, fun cannot be taken for granted; it must be performed. From the perspective of design, a game can aim to create unpleasant and uncomfortable situations for its players. Games also can produce frustration, pain, conflict, and/or strife. Anthropology is known as a discipline that often stirs up such ambivalent affects. In the context of teaching anthropology, but also with regards to the production and publication of anthropological knowledge, role-playing games can help students and the public engage with different roles, perhaps precisely because they can create these unpleasant feelings and situations. Players do not just observe but have to engage in a potentially tense situation, concerning the critical deconstruction of stereotypes regarding gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.

From this perspective, *TODO* seems to better fit the category of an *expressive* game than a persuasive or a serious one. For the media and communication scholar Sébastien Genvo, expressive games are closely related to art and can go beyond issues of persuasion (and thus avoid instrumental didacticism). He suggests that both serious and expressive games are heavily based on “communicational instrumentalization...in order to convey a predefined point of view (2016, p. 93). In an expressive game, the expressiveness emerges from the combination of the procedures of the game with the actions of the players. Expressive games try to put the player in someone else’s shoes, make them practitioners (or in anthropological terms, participants) instead of observers, and create empathy (Bogost, 2011; Trépanier-Jobin, 2016). Expressive games encourage players to experience ethical, cultural, social, and moral dilemmas, dispute certainties, and foster empathy and critical reflection, thus raising awareness of the above-mentioned issues without trying to convince or persuade players based on already fixed and established knowledge and intentions. They can still be entertaining, but in many cases a game might invite socially privileged players to “step into the smaller, more uncomfortable shoes of the downtrodden rather than the larger, more well-heeled shoes of the powerful” (Bogost, 2011), thus potentially contributing to the development of empathy and critical reflexivity.

Some final thoughts

Alongside the advantages of creating and using games in anthropology for educational purposes, there are specific limitations. The first thing to note is that “Anthropology and Games” was an undergraduate course taught in a department of social sciences and humanities where most students are unfamiliar with the design of video games. The course primarily focuses not on the cultivation of technical skills, but on issues of cultural criticism, and theoretical, methodological, epistemological and ethnographic topics related to games and play. This means that, on the one hand, it is extremely difficult to incorporate lectures concerning design theory and techniques in the curriculum and, on the other hand, that any technical work must take place beyond the space-time limits of the classroom, in the laboratory. This in turn presupposes that the appropriate infrastructure is in place. Of course, given a supportive institutional framework, anthropological game design could organically pave the way for experimental pedagogy beyond the classroom, interdisciplinary collaborations (with programmers, artists, theater practitioners, designers, etc.), and public-facing scholarship.

Another limitation might arise from the sometimes unreflexive implementation of 'simulation' in the above-mentioned approaches. For instance, the behavioral modification mentioned by Frasca is nowadays a point of major critique concerning gamification techniques and the transformation of playing a game into a repetitive—almost addictive—task of collecting points and badges. Although players might be good at playing a game, this does not necessarily mean that they cultivate specific skills such as engaging with texts in a critical fashion or are able “to undertake projects at a more complex level” (Jagoda, 2016). An ethnographically and critically informed design is necessary in order to avoid such potential pitfalls. Given that the evolution of a game is never exclusively reducible to designers' will and expectations, the *players play a significant role* in the interpretation and alteration of it.

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