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Activism and Games Exploring Boundaries

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Activism games are artifacts designed with the intention to elicit experiences that initiate commentaries and confrontations regarding political, cultural and social issues, hoping to influence players as citizens. This article observes game activism as a threefold entity that includes games as media, and players as their users and designers as those who make the games themselves, as activists. Accordingly, it explores three activism game as case studies that expand in the urban space and overlay with its practices, involving players in situated activities. As a consequence, on the one hand we discuss how these games impact on the social, political and physical context where they take place; on the other we enlighten to what extent certain authored procedures revealed goals and purposes that can question the real essence of the game, by pushing players to ask themselves “is it still a game”.

Keywords: Activism Games. Ethical Agents. Game Design. Player Experience. Wicked Problems.

Challenging perspectives: an introduction to the topic(s)

Designing games with social impact, designers can promote entertainment and fun, but also raise awareness on topics of social matter (Flanagan, 2009; Flanagan et al., 2013; Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2007; 2014). We address here the topic of game activism, namely games in general – video, board, pervasive games – discussing social justice issues or political change, questioning the boundaries between games and real life itself, and how these games challenge ethical reasoning about activism

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itself. Based on qualitative data derived from web and social media ethnography and document analysis, this article goes through three case studies – (1) *Conspiracy for Good*, (2) *KillCap* and (3) *CamOver* – exploring the role of designers as activists who activate individual's perspectives and challenge the ordinary perception of the surrounding environment.

Dealing with activism means putting some efforts to make improvements in society by promoting, obstructing, or running social, political, economic, and/or environmental activities. As a counterpart of mainstream everyday practices (de Certeau, 2010), the designer who is active on the topic can pinpoint struggles of social movements (Stokes, 2014; Macklin, 2010), covering contemporary societal wicked problems (Rittel and Webber, 1974; Sicart, 2010; 2013). By designing activism games, the designer digs into problems which are currently in need of thoughtful reflection, that take into account grey areas in spite of yes-or-no answers. Because of their subjects, communicative aim and procedures, activism games can be considered part of the broader category that Bogost (2007) named *Persuasive Games* – they propose an established way of doing something employing the game rules to affect in-game players' behaviours (Bogost, 2007). In doing so, great emphasis is placed on the medium expressive capacity to invite players to experience specific perspectives of how certain processes or systems work and consequently develop an attitude towards the issue. This considering that a wealth of social issues can be transposed and exposed into games that are commentaries, and/or invite players to comment and express their opinions. Activism games become a way to interrogate existing knowledge and perspectives, making visible their actors, processes, and consequences. Albeit the sphere of influence of procedurality is recognised and well-known, we consider crucial to rehearse the central role played by subjectivity and individuality (Sicart, 2011; Mariani, 2016) that turn activism games into ethical systems able to problematize the player's ethics or morals. A singularity of these games is that they empower players with *real* agency that impels them to take actions meant to impact on the surrounding space. These games push the line forward the fact of having game systems responding to players' actions: the *meaningful choices* (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p.157) that players take have a broader impact than contributing to the narrative. As a matter of fact, these games generate *immersive experiences*, making players feel a sense of contributing on the one hand to the narrative of the in-game world and stories, on the other of impacting on the social, cultural and/or environmental context. In the light

of these reasonings, what is rather interesting to discuss is to what extent these games affect the real world.

Games, designers and activism

However, before exploring how games, designers and activism are related, it is necessary to answer a simple but complex question: what do we mean with activism?

In a broad sense, activism is a political act intended to promote knowledge and/or spread political, economic, cultural or environmental issues and/or beliefs of a specific group of society. According to Thorpe (2011), activism seeks to put forward a vision for/of a better society by claiming for a change on behalf of minority groups – which are generally driven by the identification of a wrongdoing or problem that needs changing.

Andrew X (2009) introduces another perspective that acquires a further interesting meaning once confronted with games, saying that activism has its basis in the division between mental and manual labour where the activist identifies her/his role in life, like a job or career. Characterizing games on the same way, Suits (1978, p.41) defines playing games as ‘the voluntary effort to overcome unnecessary obstacles’; a concept echoed by McGonigal (2011, pp.22-24) who stresses the game ability to make certain obstacles so compelling that players need to work harder to overcome them. Another common point regards not seeing any results in the very next future, but looking at something bigger, in the long term. Such a tendency has a specific term in the game culture, where it is one of the most important concepts: *epic*. According to McGonigal (2011, p.98), epic ‘is how players describe their most memorable, gratifying game experiences’. Games and activism further similar in this sense: taking part in these activities, you know that you belong to a network that is *your community*.

Analysing the relationship between activism and design, Thorpe (2011) affirms it has as its linchpin the concepts of protest and resistance on behalf of excluded or neglected groups. They rely on a call for change by means of unconventional methods, especially the disruption of regular “dominant” practices. As a result, she (ibid, p.6) extracts four basic criteria that define design as a practice of activism that:

- publicly reveals or frames a problem or challenging issue,
- makes a contentious claim for change based on that problem or issue,

- works on behalf of disadvantaged groups,
- disrupts routine practices.

Designers' practices: exploring boundaries

Expanding the reasoning of Gray (2016) to games in general, game activism is identified as a threefold entity that includes games as media, and players as their users, but also those who make games, the game designers (fig. 1). Designers who, referring to Flanagan (2007; 2009) and White (2013), are active agents/actors able to encourage the development of social awareness by merging or breaking spheres and boundaries (Calabrese, 1999) between what is game and what is real life, namely blurring the concept of magic circle (Huizinga, 1938; Montola, 2005; Consalvo, 2009).



Figure 1 Game activism as a system with three interwoven elements.

Thorpe (2011) states that activism can make designers more conscious of politics and provide them with tools for “taking action”. For example, designers can develop games with the intent to raise and support social movements, taking advantage of their potentialities to trigger social empowerment and enactment (Flanagan, 2007). With this, we can broadly affirm that crafting games related to activism designers take the role of activists who ask players to “be” activists in turn, and, to a certain extent, put into practice some everyday life’s activism activity (de Certeau, 2010). This is possible by applying Bogost’s procedural rhetorics (Mariani, 2016), as a way ‘to make claims about how things work’ (Bogost, 2007, p.29, emphasis in original). Hence, like in an Aristotelian triangle where the speaker, the reader and the audience meet, taking the role of the activist,

the designer is not only changing her/his main role, but s/he is also reinventing herself/himself toward a minority group of the society – audience. Thus, the game designer becomes an active actor (Flanagan, 2007; 2009) of social and cultural change.

Hence, we propose three case studies to explore how certain authored procedures can question the real essence of the game, pushing players to ask themselves “is it still a game”?

At this point, we need to question the mainstream’s and activist’s everyday life practices (de Certeau, 2010), saying that the designer assumes the role of activist by turning strategies of the hegemonic culture into tactics used for communicate activist movements (Andrew X, 2009). Designing activism games becomes a way of social expression, a way to “share” activism and making it *experience-able* to someone else. Activism games locate themselves among contemporary forms of networked actions that deal with protests and investigation, being in the meanwhile alternative and complementary to existing communication, able to take advantage from the way social media facilitate exploration and diffusion of perspectives (Gerbaudo, 2012). Through activism games, designers can challenge some everyday-life boundary, putting the player in the condition to question the line between what is right and wrong, what is civic and ethical, and what is not. A condition that has a remarkable potential in opening public discourses and that strongly emerges from the second and third case study we discuss in the following. Particular attention in the incoming discussion regards the fact that boundaries can be negotiated, being part of wicked problems which lack of binary solutions.

Accordingly, we discuss how, developing games as (1) *Conspiracy for Good*, (2) *KillCap* and (3) *CamOver*, designers can create not only consciousness that alters individual’s perception of their community and environment, but also sparkles questions regarding their ordinary or in-game behaviors. The research has been conducted as web and social media ethnography, investigating statements that designers and players shared online in the shape of articles and posts, interviews with key actors investigating motivations, values and strategies beyond these games.

The Internet, affirmed Castells (2009), has raised new reflections around collective actions and its interface with policymaking. As a tool of collective action, the Internet is a powerful facilitator because it simplifies the rapid organization of protests around issues of public concern. According to Calderaro (2013), online mobilizations are now breaking the existing formal hierarchy in place of traditional mobilizations and they are easily spreading

as online networking. This happens because of the rapid way in which information about protests and actions can diffuse through online interpersonal networks and capture the attention of mainstream news outlets. In addition, affirms the author (ibid), the Internet has expanded the “repertoire of contention” of current movements. Starting their mobilizations on the Internet and then becoming “real”, in action, the activist games discussed in the following do not only break the boundaries of everyday-life as we are about to show, but they also break all traditional hierarchy of formal collective protest mobilizations. Thus, it is for these reasons that we need to point out the role of the game designer as social and cultural changer.

Conspiracy for Good (CFG)

Conspiracy for Good is a long, distributed and complex transmedia project. It started as a commercial pilot project in a potential series of ARGs created in collaboration with Tim Kring. It included a viral teaser campaign with celebrities claiming of being “not members”, and the sponsorship of Nokia that financed the event promoting Nokia Point & Find technology.

CFG aims to create awareness and drive a real-world change. To engage and inspire people to join the conspiracy, the project relies on actively participating in the narrative. The game is based on a storytelling system that is pervasive and strongly participatory, being inclusive of an important live play component (Stenros and Montola, 2011). The designers themselves defined indeed CFG a participation drama (Whittock, 2010), stressing the nodal role of player’s actions in a complex storyline.

CFG tells the story of an evil corporation, Blackwell Briggs, and a benevolent conspiracy organization that stands up to oppose its malevolent actions. Blackwell Briggs is threatening the Zambian village of Chataika with the construction of an oil pipeline. To defeat the threat players need to fight for the cause and uncover the ongoing criminal activities. The game ran for four months online, and culminated in four live events (of about 6 hours each on the streets of London in July and August 2010), where players were asked to complete some tasks and then go on the streets, taking part in real interactions with other players and actors.

Through its gameplay this game claims to (1) provide some contributions to London-based volunteer organisations, (2) and create an experience where players are taking part in a bigger cause, and they are understanding some of its processes. Albeit an important number of participant, CFG collected several critiques; the most important is that the game partly failed

in altering individual's perception of the topic. Players' stated that the awareness of being acting in a fictional space negatively impacted on the experience (Stenros et al., 2011).

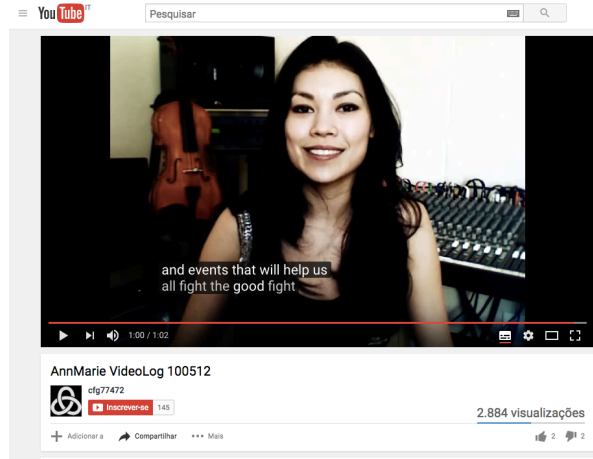


Figure 2. The violinist AnnMarie on their Youtube Channel
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=546izBhscYE>)

Crucial in this terms is the “non-members” page where players are asked to take a stand (fig. 2): by declaring “not” to be member, players deny the hegemonic system and become “conspirators”. Assuming this role, players acknowledge their participation in the game as activists. As such they could engage and even believe they can contribute to bringing social/cultural change and make the world “a better place to be”. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that even if the position and immersion of players inside the game can be compared to the position of an activist – in this case, a game that drives change for a social cause – it is limited to a fictional world. Meaning, it brings awareness but not the social change expected (Stenros et al., 2011).

KillCap

KillCap – short for Kill Capitalism – is a game created by the founder of the non-profit canadian magazine Adbusters to fight against the ongoing hostile takeover of our environments by commercial forces. White, co-

founder of Adbuster magazine, says that *KillCap* started as an attempt to create offensives all around the world, as part of a larger system of beliefs and positions, promoted in the magazine itself with an article entitled 'How to reboot capitalism' (fig. 3).

Talking about the game, Lasn (Liacas, 2013) said that he believed 'all the people that have woken up to the fact that their future doesn't compute [...] would stand up and play this *KillCap* game, to kill the current mode of capitalism and try to come up with a kind of Capitalism 2.0' (<http://socialdisruptions.com/kalle-lasn-grandfather-of-occupywallstreet>).

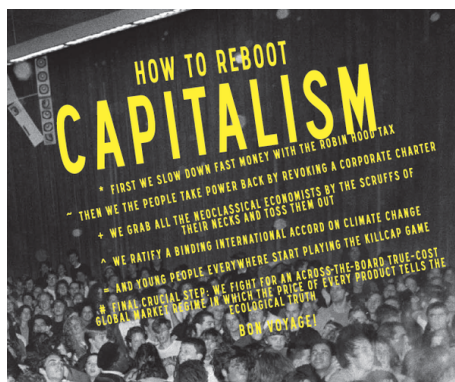


Figure 3. Fragment of the announcement of Adbusters' points and beliefs of 'How to reboot capitalism'.

This game intends to alter one's perception of the city, according to a perspective of re-appropriation of the public space, and gives a new idea of what it is a political act in our daily life. In this game players gain in-game experience points (blackpogs) for doing things as walking away from multinational chains (10), defacing the McDonald's' Golden Arches (15), or subverting questionable advertising (25) (White, 2013). According to White (2013) *KillCap* works by appropriating the gamespace of consumerism for radical play, where all multinational corporations become opportunity to level up. The game places inside the field of indie storytelling and roleplaying games, based on an alternative reality that is a counter-narrative that re-imagines life.

Although this game is no longer online, we consider the case study particularly pertinent to this reasoning because of the way it expands in and

overlaps to the real world. *KillCap* takes place in real space where players become actors in an unfolding story whose final scene is global revolution. With this game, an entire economic, cultural and social system is put into question. Going beyond sharing ideas, it allows to put activism in practice, creating online and offline actions that drive social and cultural changes.

This reasoning is partly aligned with the non-offensive concept of critical play introduced by Flanagan (2009) to describe that play activities that enquire or critique a status quo. According to Flanagan (2009, p.6), ‘critical play means to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life [...] the goal in theorizing a critical game-design paradigm is as much about the creative person’s interest in critiquing the status quo as it is about using play for such a phase change’. The concept is introduced as a different and critical approach to play and design games, and is based on the observation of games as ways to affect players. This argumentation opens some crucial discourses, enlightening the power of games that incorporate fundamental human values and psychological principles to promote learning, attitude and behaviour change (Flanagan, 2009; et al., 2013). In this regard, *KillCap* includes challenging acts that range from boycotting a brand to the act of really damaging corporate properties, meaning, to alter the order of public space and society itself. In so doing, the game rules allow players to act within the limits of the law, but it rewards more unlawful acts. Thus, the discussion goes beyond game design, entering the field of engagement and activism: what is to be a “good” activist and how far can an activist go with his/her engagement towards a movement?

With this, we wonder: what happens when the critique against consumerism turns into acts of destruction?

Cam Over

In comparison with the previous cases, *Cam Over* – short for Camera Over – is the most radical one. Mainly active across Berlin’s subways and streets, this game was designed in 2013 to tear down closed-circuit television cameras (CCTV) in public spaces, taking the shape of a (destructive) game-competition, as the author defined it (<https://camover.noblogs.org/spielidee/idea-of-the-game>). It lies on the complained motivation that ‘The gaze of the cameras does not fall equally on all users of the street’ (<https://camover.noblogs.org/faq/faq-in-english>),

but is selective, since CCTVs discriminate against certain groups of people that are stereotyped as criminals.



Figure 4. Website header with icons suggesting how to “take care” of CCTV
<https://camover.noblogs.org>

Cam Over developers and designers are unknown, but in the game webpage they explain and defend their beliefs. From FAQs we can see some of their motivational reasons: e.g. ‘Video surveillance is used to monitor our lives, to control our actions, and to suppress our resistance – above all, it’s against our peaceful coexistence [...] we can defend ourselves against the state and against corporations and take away their sight! CAM OVER!’. On the website they also present some methods players can use to assault cameras, ranging from using plastic bags to stickers and tapes. Beyond stimulating to put such actions in practice, *Cam Over* plainly calls its players for communicating their performances by sharing them with posts, videos, images and reports. This provides further game-points. However, because of the very nature of this game, authors warn players that concealing their identity, while not essential, is recommended.

As a result of its atypical gameplay and real-world consequences, *Cam Over* has been matter of discussion on different media.

Writing about the game, The Guardian emphasises that points are given with bonus scores for the most innovative modes of destruction (<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/shortcuts/2013/jan/25/game-destroy-cctv-cameras-berlin>). On the other hand, The Observer denounces the practice of tearing cameras apart in such a violent and often alarming way as a counter-productive act of activism, as vandalism with destructive and aggressive “players” in balaclavas (fig. 5) (<http://observers.france24.com/en/20130111-security-cameras-german-activists-camover-hanover-vandalism-european-police-congress-berlin-blog-surveillance>). Michael Ebeling, member of the anti-CCTV groups AK Vorrat and Freedom not Fear, sustains in the same article that a better practice is

making people aware of how intrusive and infesting urban surveillance is, by personifying cameras that constantly invade our privacy, following, looking and listening people without any permission.





Figure 5. An assault in Berlin's Subway, uploaded on January 9th 2013. Full video: <https://youtu.be/2yXddUNgouM?list=PLLWWwP1Omb51sS6Hf2kt81TyGK-4RuAcO>

Taking into consideration social norms and morality, we can question *Cam Over* both as activism and as game. 'The activist is a specialist or an expert in social change' (Andrew X, 2009), and activism games invite and empower the player to be an active persona, at least during the game session (Flanagan, 2007). Thus, according to Andrew X, thinking of oneself as an activist means considering oneself as belonging to a wider community engaged in a social cause or struggle, thinking of being more advanced than others in the appreciation of the need for social change and in the knowledge of how to achieve it. 'The activist identifies with what they do and thinks of it as their role in life' (Andrew X, 2009, p.3).

On the other hand, we can stress that *Cam Over* does not fit into the definitions of game presented in the Game Studies literature (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004), being more similar to a gamified system. If this game would have been designed as an online game, it would be into the category of mindless destruction games, online games designed for the player to move around in a virtual city and destroying all its surrounding. The point is that *Cam Over* was created to be played offline, having the public space, and objects of private and public domain deliberately destroyed or damaged. Hence, *Cam Over* masks real violent acts of vandalism; a perspective

reinforced by its creator itself, who once affirmed 'Although we call it a game [...] our aim is to destroy as many cameras as possible and to have an influence on video surveillance in our cities' (<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/shortcuts/2013/jan/25/game-destroy-cctv-cameras-berlin>).

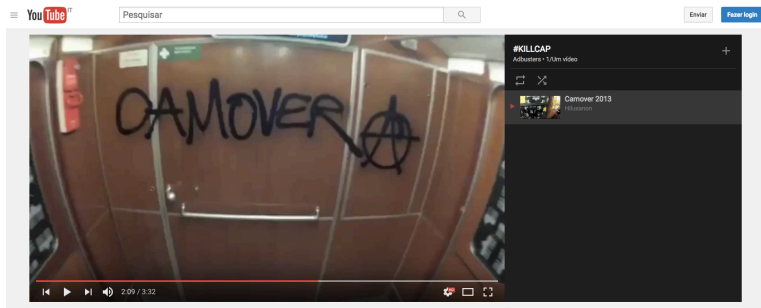


Figure 6. The signature of some “players” on Berlin’s subway.

Conclusions: more than a matter of empowerment

We introduced this paper stating that by designing games with social impact, designers can promote not only entertainment and fun, but also raise awareness on topics of social matter (Flanagan, 2009; et al., 2013; and Nissenbaum, 2007). Nevertheless, bringing or not social change was not the matter of discussion we intended to cover with the cases studies proposed. Our aim was to debate on the role of the game designer in crafting such activist games and on the consequences that game immersion and motivation can raise among players. Our analysis confirms that the experiences initiated commentaries and confrontations between players regarding political, cultural and social issues, feeding in parallel several discussions among different media regarding the social impact of these games, meaning how such games actually influenced/changed players as citizens. We believe activism game designers have the duty to create innovation activating players’ imaginaries by immersing them into extraordinary experiences (Murray, 1997; Frasca, 2001; Ryan, 2001) that can influence mindset showing interactive representations and simulation of how certain systems and processes work (Frasca, 2003). However, these games go beyond developing awareness of social struggles; by creating not only consciousness that alters individual’s perception, but (ideally) real first-

hand experience. Playing such games tends to have political but also ethical impact because they ask players to embody political positions and engage in political actions; actions frequently fraught with systematic provocation and revolutionary intents, that often many of them would not have spontaneously taken.

Nevertheless, designers can encourage violent acts in the name of social cause, making such intent more or less explicit to players. Therefore, especially moving through societal spaces performing activist play, it is crucial that players take into high consideration what they are allowed and invited to do within a system that is overlapped to the everyday spaces and life. A consideration particularly significant when players are real agents of action and change, “empowered” to somehow influence the surrounding spaces and activities.

Being aware of their diversities, we can hence translate this reasoning according to the three case studies presented and their outcomes:

- Eventought CFG has a very attractive ideal and benevolent purpose, the game was not successfully able to maintain the initial expectations, in terms of empowering players to be real activists, whose decisions and actions actually impacts on the real world. Moreover, making a clear distinction between game and reality (Stenros et al., 2011), it negatively impacted on the chance to have real, situated agency.
- *KillCap* resulted more balanced on allowing players to take positions and action, boycotting shady brands and expressing their perspective. In doing so, the game allows players to decide their level of action according to their principles and will, but by in-game-rules it encourages clear acts of vandalism as damaging the McDonald's golden arches.
- *Cam Over* by its own rules plainly suggests players to be vandalic, using points as rewards for destructing CCTV.

These games were designed with the main purpose of activating players as activists, even if to a different extent. Thus, the boundaries we explored so far show us a panorama that is a complex wicked problem itself. Along this enquiry we have been pushed over and over to ask ourselves what is the boundary between game and real life itself. A point of controversy further nurtured by the analysis of the case studies proposed above that increased its being dense and wicked. Starting from observing how these

case studies are designed to challenge the contemporary and very blurred definitions of the words that compose the practice, activism + games, we reached out to argumentations and reasonings that opened ambiguous and challenging perspectives. We put some of the tasks, activities and perspectives these game proposed into question, solicited by the way they resulted into physical outcomes. Mainly because of the very typology and outcomes of these games, we can say that by engaging with certain activism games, players are empowered to effectively participate in activities with real, more or less immediate (see cases studies presentation), consequences. Activities that raise ethical and moral questions about the role of the player in such experiences.

That being said, we conclude by acknowledging and stressing the ethical and societal role of designers within activism games design as those who have the “power” to “empower” and create not only a consciousness that alters individual’s perception of their community and their environment, but also sparkle questions regarding ordinary as well as in-game behaviors.

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