



Persuasive games Games that change your mind

Games that make you think, change your behaviour, or mentally prepare you for treatment. Teresa de la Hera helps us understand this phenomena.

Interview with Teresa de la Hera

Playing an immigration officer in a fictional Eastern European country. In which universe does that make for an appealing game, one that two million people will buy and actually play? Well, as it turns out: ours.

Papers, Please is the name of the game, literally, in which players do little else than denying or granting access to people crossing the border. Role-playing the immigration officer seems simple, maybe even superficial at first. It is, however, the complete opposite.

"This game made me think", says Teresa de la Hera, a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at Utrecht University. "And I feel this is the

real potential of games: make us reflect about things, talk about them. Games can be great conversation starters."

De la Hera wasn't really surprised by the impact *Papers, Please* had on her. She couldn't have been, since she's one of the most prolific researchers in the field of games with a message, with a goal beyond entertainment or training. A lot of her research revolves around what is called 'persuasive games'.

"A persuasive game is a game that has been designed with the intention of influencing the attitude or behaviour of a player beyond the gaming session", De la Hera explains. "There





PAPERS, PLEASE (2013) is a single-player 'Dystopian Document Thriller' in which the player steps into the role of an immigration inspector in the fictional country of Arstotzka in the year 1982. The image is a still from the short movie based on the game. PAPERSPLEA.SE

are multiple applications in many different fields, think education, health, advertising, politics... They can be used, for example, to change the attitude of players towards relevant matters such as climate change or the refugees crisis, by being used as persuasive media.”

“Persuasive games are also used, to motivate and engage players into activities that they need to perform, but are difficult or boring for them, such as therapies for cognitive rehabilitation, just to mention an example.”

Fascination

De la Hera's 2011 PhD thesis *Persuasive Structures in Advergaming* was named 'the best academic work by a Spanish scholar in the field of audiovisual communication'. It's just one entry in her long list of projects and publications on persuasive games. Why the fascination?

“Through different research projects I had the opportunity to see how persuasive games have been used to change the life of players in positive and significant ways. It is fascinating to discover to which extent new technologies, and especially digital games, can be used to make us think about a topic in a different way, to engage us to do something that we want to do but we cannot find the motivation to perform, or to connect people.”

“I conducted a study, for example, in which a game was used to foster interaction between children with different cultural backgrounds who have recently arrived to the Netherlands and who did not have the language skills to communicate with classmates. The game was used in this case as mediation tool to initiate an interaction in which verbal communication was not central. It was really exciting to see the evolution of the relationship of players during the playing sessions.”

Bio.



► TERESA DE LA HERA

is postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University. She started her academic career in Spain in 2006 where she conducted research in the fields of new media and persuasive games. She moved to the Netherlands where she obtained an International PhD Fellowship to finish her PhD *Persuasive Structures in Advergaming* at Utrecht University.

Project Info.

► PERSUASIVE GAMING: FROM THEORY-BASED DESIGN TO VALIDATION AND BACK

MAIN PROJECT MEMBERS

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Connecting people and make them think, that's not a mean feat. However, games have the capacity to go even further. De la Hera: “I love the cases in which digital games are used to improve the quality of life of players in different and meaningful ways. I have studied, for example, the different ways in which digital games have been used to increase adherence of young children to cancer treatments. Cancer treatments are difficult to go through and have a lot of side effects. For children it's not easy to understand why they have to undergo these treatments, as they make them feel terrible. Digital games have been used in different ways to help them to adhere to the treatment. *Re-Mission*, for example, is a well known example of a game that is used to help children and adolescents to better understand how the chemotherapy works in their bodies. By understanding how the treatment works they are more open and positive to get through, even though they feel terrible during the process.”

Effectiveness

One of the research projects De la Hera recently is involved in is the project *Persuasive Gaming: from theory-based design to validation and back*. “The unique aspect of that project is that we study three different aspects related to persuasive games, by joining the expertise of researchers from three different universities. First, at Utrecht University, where I work as postdoc researcher, we focus on explaining in which different ways persuasive games can be used to persuade players from a theoretical perspective.”

“Second, at the Technological University Eindhoven, my colleagues transform theoretical claims into design principles to be used to support the design of persuasive games. They

constantly work on student projects that help them test which design strategies work better, depending on the purpose of the game. One example of this is a virtual reality game that has been designed to increase empathy for refugees.”

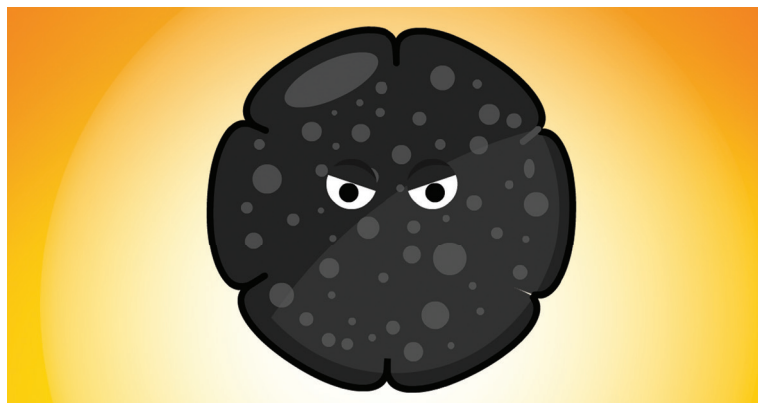
“Finally, at the Erasmus University Rotterdam my colleagues are focused on validating the effectiveness of persuasive games. They are not only testing the effectiveness of concrete games included in their studies, but also proposing validation protocols and models that can be used by researchers and companies working with persuasive games.”

And? Have you proven their effectiveness? “We cannot say, in general, if persuasive games are effective or not. It really depends on the game and its objectives. Persuasive games are effective when the game is effectively designed considering specific persuasive objectives, the context in which it is going to be played and the characteristics of the players that are going to play it. The results of our project include theoretical models and design and validation protocols that help not only to study persuasive games, but also to design them and validate their effectiveness.”

Attractive

If a game is typically designed as a persuasive game, is it still capable of reaching a large audience? Because, without an audience even a good persuasive game is still persuading nobody. “A persuasive game is a game. It should be designed in a way that is attractive for the players that are supposed to play it. If it is not interesting for them, then it is a bad persuasive game, in the same way you can find a bad entertaining game.”

“A persuasive game can reach a large audience if that is the objective of the game. In some cas-



RE-MISSION 2 (2013), a series of games from the non-profit HopeLab, uses the research and experience obtained from the first *Re-Mission* in 2006 to provide an even more accessible and engaging series of action games targeted specifically at adolescents and young adults with cancer.
RE-MISSION2.ORG

More.

► PERSUASIVEGAMING.NL

A BREATHTAKING JOURNEY (2016) places the player in the shoes of a refugee who is fleeing from a war-torn country in his/her struggle to escape the increasing violence against citizens. This interactive virtual reality experience is an attempt to increase empathy towards refugees.
ABREATHAKINGJOURNEY.COM



es, however, the game is designed to reach a specific target audience. So, it, again, depends on the objectives of the game. But it does not mean that because the game has a serious purpose, it should be boring or not attractive enough for players.”

“A relevant challenge is to find a game mechanic that is attractive for players and that works for the persuasive goals that the game needs to meet. Our research project, *Persuasive gaming*, is focused on providing knowledge that helps to better connect these different aspects related to persuasive games.”

Bad games

Asked for an example of a bad, dysfunctional, (thus non) persuasive game, De la Hera opts not to refer to a specific game, but to a concrete ‘mistake’ she commonly encounters in persuasive games. “I was talking before about the need of persuasive games to be interesting and attractive to players. Sometimes, with the intention of designing games that are attractive to players, game mechanics get implemented that are not in tune with the persuasive intent of the game. For example, designing a game to learn a new alphabet, and including time pressure as one of the mechanics to make the game more exciting. If I am trying to learn new letters, I need a game mechanic that allows me to take the time that I need to learn each character. If you add time pressure, probably I need to repeat the same steps again and again, and I get frustrated or bored.”

“It’s also common to see a persuasive game that is a copy of an entertainment game, just with a different theme. For example, the *Bejeweled*-game transformed into an advertising game by changing the diamonds for logos of the brand. Why would someone play the advertising version of this game instead of the original one? So, a good balance between entertaining goals and persuasive goals is relevant to design a successful persuasive game.”