Reflecting Civic Protest – the Occupy Istanbul Game

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ABSTRACT

The Occupy Istanbul game engages several topics pertaining to the relationship of the individual and the political sphere, including civic obedience, resistance against state power and citizen media. The project allows players to develop and test different strategies of (non)engagement, from being a passive by-stander to violent activism. At the same time this decision is complicated by divergent goals in the public and the private sphere and by ambiguous decisions whose consequences become apparent only at later points in the game narrative. The paper presents the game's design, initial user reactions, and plans for later modifications.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: General – Games.

General Terms

Design, Experimentation, Human Factors

Keywords

Video Game Narrative, Interactive Digital Narrative, Serious Games, Political Games

1. INTRODUCTION

The persuasive power of video games has long been described [3] and video games that engage serious topics are a well-established category [2]. For example, the Ayiti [6][7] game challenges the player to manage a virtual family's survival amidst the harsh realities of a third-world country. Airport Security [10] questions the security measures put in place after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Fort McMoney [5] combines a filmic documentary style with an interface for discussion surrounding the topic of oil sand extraction in Canada.

The *Occupy Istanbul* game, a co-production between the author and film director Inan Temelkuran, engages the topic of the Gezi park protests in Istanbul in the summer of 2013. We aim to have players experience civic disobedience both as decision-making under pressure and in through the consequences of these decisions. Our design approach focuses on narrative and variety through replay, by putting the player in the middle of a scenario which recreates the protest and forces her to make decisions under pressure and experience the consequences.

2. GEZI PARK PROTESTS

In the summer of 2013, civic resistance against a plan to remove Gezi park, the last piece of public green space in central Istanbul led to widespread protests throughout Turkey. Many protesters saw Gezi park as a symbol for the politics of the ruling AK party and Prime Minister Erdogan, who they perceive as increasingly authoritarian and as attempting to restrict civic liberties – for example the ability to get an abortion or to buy alcohol – in the name of a more Islamic religious direction for Turkey. The state reacted to the protests with a massive deployment of riot police.

While the initial form of protest – massive demonstrations, barricades and street fighting with police – has subsequently stopped, members of the movement maintain that the lasting significance is in a change of attitude towards civic engagement and perception of the ability toThe protest unwanted government decisions. A continuation of this perspective is seen in the form of local civic discussion forums.

Several aspects of the movement stand out. The movement brought together a heterogeneous group of people, many of whom did not communicate with each other before, for example soccer fans and gay/lesbian rights activists. [11] In addition, instead of attacking the government directly, the use of subversive humor was widespread. For example, slogans asked for a tear gas attack as a substitute for the daily shower while others declared that only men who had experienced a gas attack are attractive.

Another important aspect in connection to the Gezi park events is in the role of media reporting. Infamously, the Turkish affiliate of CNN showed an animal documentary featuring penguins during the height of the protests, while other affiliates and the CNN main feed was broadcasting live from Gezi park. Many observers interpreted this occurrence as an indication of the level of state influence on media in Turkey. As a reaction to this lack of local reporting, many protestors took to Twitter, Facebook and blogs, to report about the situation and make the protesters' perspective known.

3. OCCUPY ISTANBUL

3.1 Design Approach

The overall topic of civic disobedience, together with the particular aspects of the Gezi park movement, provides a rich source for a game narrative. The narrative frame also helps the user to orient herself and to understand her role in the game.[4]

Our game features a first-person view that puts the player in the midst of the protests and lets her experience events and related difficult choices a protestor makes – and sometimes is forced to make - in an unfolding game narrative.

The general interest in the unfolding narrative is a compelling reason to start playing. From that point on events may happen

whether the player makes a decision or not, just as in a real protest situation and progress to a particular ending. To entice a player to replay the overall experience is designed to be relatively short. At the same time, the game provides several alternate paths. Through replay the player can experience this variety, reconsider her choices and experience the different outcomes.

This focus on decision-making under pressure and on replay to experience alternate outcomes distinguishes our design from the focus on simulating the control of a protest movement in *People Power: The Game of Civil Resistance* [9].

3.2 Player Experience

The player is in the difficult position of having to decide between the personal goal of trying to find a friend, and her participation in the movement. Her actions lead to different outcomes and often yield unintended consequences. For example, the player's decision to attack police can become an argument for the government to discredit the protest movement and will be shown on state TV. At the same time, picking up a seemingly unimportant object like a cell phone charger will allow the player to record police violence and publish the video to social media in an attempt to create an alternate media image.

In this way, the player learns about the Gezi park protests, but also experiences the consequences of her own choices as a citizen and political actor. This reflection about the mechanics of civic disobedience is what we are aiming for.

3.3 Implementation

The game was created in the Advanced Stories Authoring and Presentation System (ASAPS) [1], an authoring software for interactive digital narratives. Original pictures and video footage, shot during the protests, provide visuals for a first-person perspective. *Occupy Istanbul's* branching structure incorporates procedural elements which keep track of earlier decisions and inventory items picked up by the player. Timers force the player to make quick decisions or to find herself being arrested quickly, while random elements provide additional variety.

It is important to note that the narrative design in *Occupy Istanbul* is not concerned with replicating traditional narrative structure like Freytag's arc, nor does it try to identify conventional elements like the climax. Instead the concrete structure emerges out of the combination of ASAPS's beats, atomic narrative units that fulfill functions such as conversation choice or timed display.

3.4 Initial Reactions

Figure 1. Visitor experiencing Occupy Istanbul

The game was first shown as part of the art exhibition at the ICIDS 2013 conference in Istanbul, Turkey (Figure 1). Reactions by visitors were very positive. Many visitors expressed their satisfaction of being able to re-experience the protests in the form of a game. Visitors unconnected to the events saw the game as an educational experience, in which they learned more about the Gezi park protests.

3.5 Future Plans

We plan to enhance *Occupy Istanbul* in significant ways, mainly focusing on letting the player experience the aforementioned particular aspects of the Gezi protest movement even better. What is missing so far is the connection between different groups of the Turkish society, which we plan to implement in the form of a series of encounters with representatives of these groups, for example a gay rights activist and an elderly Kurdish woman. We are also considering an option to change sides and experience the role of a member of the riot police.

4. Conclusion

An essential aspect of (serious) video games – afforded by the procedural quality of digital media – is in their persuasive power of expression [2]. Occupy Istanbul makes use of procedural, interactive narrative [8] to let players experience both the situated pressure of decisions during a protest and the consequences of these political acts of compliance or disobedience.

5. REFERENCES

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