game environments

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Interview with Jörg Friedrich on Procedural Rhetoric in his Game *Through the Darkest of Times*

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Abstract
In this interview, Jörg Friedrich, co-founder of Berlin-based independent studio *Paintbucket Games*, talks about the ways in which his team used Procedural Rhetoric in their game *Through the Darkest of Times* (2018), to portray civil resistance in Nazi-Germany.

Procedural Rhetoric is a term coined by Ian Bogost in his seminal book *Persuasive Games. The expressive power of video games* (2010). The concept describes the unique techniques computer games use to convey the worldviews of their designers. Rather than using linear narrative in the form of language and imagery, games try to convince their players by means of their processes, rules, and mechanics. Bogost (2010, 29) writes that the arguments of Procedural Rhetoric

> "(…) are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models. In computation, those rules are authored in code, through the practice of programming."

In this interview, Jörg Friedrich, designer of *Through the Darkest of Times* (2018) talks about his use of and his views on Procedural Rhetoric. *Through the Darkest of Times* is

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a turn-based strategy game set during the historic time of Nazi-Germany. In it, the player controls the fate of a civil resistance group.

Jörg, how did you use the game mechanics of *Through the Darkest of Times* (2018) to convey your intentions and messages?

Different aspects played a role. Our intention was to make a game that illuminates fascism from a civil perspective, from someone who was in opposition. I always call that: Telling the story of people who were in the opposition at that time. It is a very exciting and impressive story. What a courage it must have been. We asked ourselves: How does this translate into a game?

For example, one vital question is: When do you win and when do you lose such a game? A basic aspect of all games is to achieve a goal or overcome an obstacle. It 493 doesn't always have to be winning, but a measurable result, so to speak. How do I do that in such a game? Let's say that I only make it for half a year with my resistance group and then it is dissolved or dissolves itself or everyone is arrested. Do I lose then? What is the message when I say: Well, now you have lost the game. Game over. You did it wrong. Try again? A lot of games do that. That was a very difficult question. We didn't want to say: You did it *wrong*, therefore the game is over. We wanted to convey that what has been achieved is still impressive. For a long time, we have been looking for a solution to this problem and the result today has become a compromise. I am satisfied with the message of the game, but it does not make everyone happy. You see in reviews again and again that people can't deal with how the game handles it. We decided that there is no predetermined goal. In the beginning we tried to use victory conditions, for example the goal of getting 50 supporters by the end of July. That was really easy on the game design side because

it works right away. The players tell themselves: Right, I have to gather supporters. Okay, now I have 35, I need 15 more. It's a crystal-clear thing that people expect in a game. That worked well on a gameplay level, but the message behind it did not make me happy. Was a group with only ten supporters wrong? That's why we took out ready-made goals. You have to find your own goals.

Figure 1. Map overview of possible resistance actions in the game © Paintbucket Games.

However, the game offers you objectives. There are three chapter actions. They all go in a different direction and are an offer to players. These optional goals unlock small additional stories and your group is featured in the newspaper. And then you get a little Tap on the Shoulder, so you know that you've done well. But there is no set reward. I don't have to do them because I want to unlock this and that, it's just for myself. If I say: I think it's right to do a big sabotage in a propaganda exhibition, then I work towards it, and then at some point I do it, and I feel good for doing it, but there's no additional reward from the game. So by now there's a little contact that you keep. But there's not this typical: If you do that, you get 1000 XP and with 1000 XP

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you can unlock this and that. This measurable success is deliberately not there because I wanted the players to do it on their own initiative and have the feeling at the end of the game: Ok, that was the right thing to do, because I think it's right, and not because the game gives me a certain reward.

With us, procedural rhetoric takes place about how we tend not to do certain things that other games do. On the other hand, we felt that we needed some kinds of mechanics that dictated a certain way of doing things. There's one extreme where people just play the mechanics and there's the other extreme where people don't play at all, they just get lost in the scenario. And we experienced that problem, that people didn't do anything anymore because they were afraid. Because a lot of things were hidden on purpose, for example for a long time you couldn't see if the police were after your people. It was a hidden mechanism. And people couldn't see it. And then suddenly their members or they themselves were arrested. That led to an insecurity, which was very good on the one hand, because it fits very well into the scenario. Narratively, I think it was strong, but the problem was that in terms of player behavior, it caused people to do nothing. So that they would sit there and be scared and not do anything at all in the game. And we didn't want them to do that either. So we had to find a compromise. We asked ourselves the question: What happens if you just do nothing? Is it all about survival? Is it a game whose objective is to survive? If I say the goal is to survive, then I could say, the smartest thing I can do is to do nothing, to not resist, so I don't get arrested.

Therefore, there is this group morality in the game, which has nothing to do with ethical morality. It refers to the fighting spirit and to cohesion and loyalty. And this value decreases all the time, because everything is getting worse and worse. It is supposed to show that the pressure on the group is getting bigger and bigger and

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the prospect of changing something is getting smaller and smaller. And when the morale is at zero, the group actually dissolves and the game ends. When the morale is at the bottom, you get an epilogue, a little story about each member, maybe three sentences. For example: After the group split up, Hans continued to resist. Then he was drafted. Then he fell on the Eastern Front. Or: Lisa went abroad, helped from outside and returned after the war. The feeling we want to convey is: You haven't lost the game; the game is simply over. The story you started is now over. Your story of resistance is over. And that's not necessarily losing the game, it's just over. This moral mechanic is also supposed to lead to you resisting in the first place. That you don't just curl up and say: I'm not doing anything anymore; but that if you want to continue playing the game you have to resist, because you get morale back through these resistance actions. And because the game is not a game about: I survive the Nazi era and keep as calm as possible; but about resistance and if I don't resist any more, then the game ends. That is the background of this mechanism.

So I think those are the two most powerful game mechanics that express the basic message of the game: That there's no set goal and that when it ends, you get this epilogue. That it doesn't end with a classic game over. But that it tries to give the feeling of a conclusion. A moment of closure, so to speak.

This also has to do with the fact that the game originally had only one mode. Now there are two modes: the narrative mode and the resistance mode. The narrative mode has several savegames. If my group dissolves, I can go back a few weeks and try again. This mode wasn't originally intended, there was only the resistance mode where that's not the case. And that means we had to offer an end, because then it was really over. You can't go back and decide differently. And that's why we wanted to make clear: You didn't get *through the darkest of times* with your group, the story is

just over now. That was the approach. We put in the story mode anyway, because there were a lot of people that we felt just wanted to see everything in the game. And that there were also a lot of people playing the game who don't normally play computer games.

Historian Nico Nolden told *Der Spiegel* in an interview:

> "[...] it could be problematic to divide people in the game into clearly distinguishable groups: Catholics, Social Democrats, Communists. There is hardly any possibility of intersection between these groups in the game. That was one way into the crisis: this idea of not wanting to cooperate with other factions. The game continues this thought through its mechanics" (Kreienbrink 2020).

What do you think about that quote?

The intention was exactly the opposite and obviously it didn't work for Nico. However, the intention was (and that was also our inspiration) to show a group that came together from different backgrounds. Usually the members of the group are totally mixed and have different backgrounds, views and biographies and yet they work together. They need to work together to move forward. But there are also conflicts, which we wanted to show. That was a very important aspect for me right from the start. Apart from the scenario under National Socialism, I found that one of the things that fascinated me from the very beginning about the history of these resistance groups (especially the *Rote Kapelle*, our main role model here in Berlin) was that they were so diverse, had conflicts and still worked together. They had Social Democrats, Liberals, Catholics, Communists and they also bickered. There were discussions, where they argued bitterly and were about to throw in the towel. And

some of them quit. There were these conflicts and I absolutely wanted to have them in. That's why we have them in the headquarters or at the member events, where there are discussions and arguments. These conflicts are depicted there.

Figure 2. Headquarter of the resistance group © Paintbucket Games.

But the members work together, so I found the quote a bit strange. So I get where he's coming from. Of course, it's difficult, the interpretation is up to him. I meant it differently. And these milieus existed, because as a communist I had no access to the Catholic-conservative milieu. Usually acquaintances were attached to these milieus. That's why it was so unusual for groups to form alliances that crossed boundaries between milieus and ideologies. And that is what the game tries to show. It is mechanical somehow, of course. I send the communist to the communists and the Catholics to the Catholics... well... I think that corresponds to reality and apart from that: I can send the catholic to the communists. It's just that it's not going so well. So my chances of success are lower then. But it still works.

I think that he criticizes that the game does not represent infinite complexity. That you don't have a figure who is a social democrat, but who is sympathetic to communist ideas, who has a Jewish wife and then again, a Catholic background. But it has to stop somewhere, in my opinion. A game cannot represent infinite complexity.

Yes, it's tricky. It's easy to fall into this trap as a game designer. It's great fun to simulate things. And it is relatively easy to add values and attributes. There are all kinds of values in the background that we threw out in the end or didn't use. Because having the values is one thing, the other thing is to communicate them to people in some way. Because you won't get anything out of the most complex simulation if the players don't get it. If there's a lot of great stuff going on in the background and it's rolled out and simulated, but in the end it's not reflected in what's happening, it's more likely to confuse people and it doesn't really help tell the story.

Would you say that it has always been a balancing act between a game with entertainment value and getting your message across?

Yeah, totally. As I said, one example is the renunciation of given goals. It is absolutely clear that the game would be much more motivating for many people if there were fixed goals. It's dopamine, it's tried and tested. Carrot … there … you have. And leaving that out is definitely something that makes it a bit more inaccessible, but at the same time I would have found it wrong to have it in.

Procedural Rhetoric – You are using the term yourself. How did you learn about the concept? Did you guys talk about designing the game using the term? Or did you discuss it on a meta-level?

Phew, I don't know. I've known the word for a long time. I know the texts of Bogost. I don't even know what came first. There is of course the term *Ludonarrative dissonance*. These are issues I've been dealing with long before *Through the Darkest of Times*, but always very pragmatically related to my current work. We worked on *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) before. That was already a very important topic there. I don't think the terms were that common then. I'm not sure if we used them back then.

But at that point, it was definitely already about: How do I create emotions in players in a way that does justice to the theme? There's a school of good game design. But when you're dealing with certain themes that inevitably creates negative emotions because of these themes, when I'm making a tragic game or something that's supposed to upset, then I very quickly come into conflict with this classic game design. Because classic game design is always designed to give players as much fun as possible. And then I have to start thinking about rules. Which rules I might have to override or tone down or use differently if I want to achieve the desired effect. And all of that falls under the category of procedural rhetoric for me. To do justice to the scenario or the narrative. I think that when Sebastian (Sebastian St. Schulz, other co-founder of Paintbucket Games) and I talk about it, we don't need the term procedural rhetoric so much. We rather talk about whether a mechanic makes sense, whether it has the effect we imagine, whether it's OK.

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And with *Through the Darkest of Times* in particular, it really was like that. I always had to make sure that I was reassured by people who weren't game designers or anything like that, because there's so little you can rely on in game design. I'd rather talk to a teacher and say: Hey, if we tell it the way we want to tell it, in an interactive way. Would you think that would be okay? Not with the aim of getting the game into school, but rather with the question: What does that do to people?

So, you intentionally asked people outside the gaming scene to get a different perspective. Was it because you thought: OK, gamers have a certain way of approaching a game and I want to include non-gamers as well, so that they give me different perspectives on what message is coming across?

Yes, partly exactly that. Other designers often have a very strong focus on a well-functioning game. But especially when it comes to communicating the Holocaust, there are other fields that have much more experience than game developers. Because this has hardly been done before. So, it was obvious to look around. Not only with teachers, but also at memorials and with historians. What kind of concepts are there? What kind of pitfalls do they see? On the one hand we didn't want to trivialize the topic and on the other hand we didn't want to traumatize the players. And that is a fine line, especially when it comes to racism, anti-Semitism, mass murder and genocide. How do you do that? And we got as much input from as many different areas as possible. Until now, other developers have little knowledge about it. Only just now, I feel that experience is being gathered.

Did you exchange ideas with other game designers who are working on serious games?

Yes. For example, we exchanged ideas with the *Attentat 1942* (2017) people. This is a Czech game about the assassination of Heidrich and the persecution of the civilian population afterwards by the Nazis. But I would say that it is much more educational than ours.

Does your game consciously try to convince through mechanics? And if so, have you thought about the ethical consequences? Did at some point in your team meetings somebody say: No, we can't do that. It's too manipulative?

Nope. We have always been relatively clear about what our attitude and our statement is. And I think the game makes no secret of it. I think that's okay too. So, we are not so subtle. [Laughs] We are actually quite open. So: No, not really. And if someone says: No, I don't want to play against fascism. Well, then play something else.

I find it much more problematic that there are a lot of games that pretend to be mere entertainment, as if they had no message at all. And in reality they have a totally blatant message. I think that is exactly what we are not doing. We say from the very beginning: This is a political game and it's about people who resist the Nazis. And the people who resist are the heroes of the game and the Nazis are not. So we were not aware of any guilt. I think *Spec Ops* (2012) is more manipulative than that. But to be honest with you, we were never ashamed of it either. On the contrary, I was actually always quite proud of it.

That's part of it, it's all manipulation. Games are always a big magic trick. Hey, a 3D game is not really 3D... it's just make-believe! [Laughs] And so it is with everything. A good game builds an illusion for you all the time. Every good book, every good movie does the same. It tries to create something in your head that is much more than it can actually represent. Manipulation, for example trying to create certain emotions, is part of the medium for me, I can't leave that out. Even games that pretend to be purely mechanical, that is, separated from politics, do that. Even *Tetris* (1984) does something with you. And that's why I don't find that condemnable. Especially when it's something political, as in our case, and it's not hidden but presented quite openly, then I can't really find anything wrong with it.

So in the debate *Are games political?* you would say that games are always political in themselves?

Phew, no idea. This is a flat share discussion. I don't know. Is everything political? Well, I think that much more games are political than those who admit it. Especially when it comes to topics that in some way relate to our real life, our society or relationships between people. It doesn't have to be our society, it can also be a fantasy game, but then it's about the relationships between man – woman, man – man, governance etc. This is all political, just as every political work on such topics is automatically political in the sense that it transports, conveys, communicates a certain attitude. That is always the case. That cannot be denied.

I don't find that problematic either. I also don't think that every game has to write on the front of the box, in what way it is political. I will give you the example of *Sim City* (1989-2014). That is also a Bogost example. *Sim City* is an example of an inherently capitalist society in which it is positive, for example, when taxes are reduced because

the economy automatically improves. One can question whether this is really the case. Some economists would see it differently. And I still don't think it's bad that *Sim City* works like that and that they don't write: Hey, we're simulating a blatantly capitalist society here. Because the makers have simply modelled society as they experience it, from their perspective. And that's why that's in there and carries on like that. I don't think that they have the intention of training everyone to be a real estate tyrant. It's just the way they see the world.

You said, you have a very open message; you make no secret of it. Asked pointedly: How would you distinguish the game from the genre of propaganda games, which is also talked about a lot?

Well... even the word propaganda is difficult to me. It always has such a negative connotation. Propaganda is always what other people do, never what you do yourself. In Hitler's time, propaganda was a ministry and from propaganda came advertising, which tries to convey certain messages. I think I am not sufficiently informed about the topic to be able to draw a clear line there, so when does a game simply express the mindset of its makers and when does it cross the dark line of systematic influence. It's definitely a game that ultimately says that it sucks when Nazis are in power. I think others have to set the label; I can't do that.

I find it fascinating that you say: Propaganda is always done by others than oneself. Was there first the topic of the Nazi-era or was there first the idea: *We want to do something about civil resistance, about democratic ideas*?

First there was the idea to make a game about a group that you manage, without the fixed setting. I felt like making such a game because I had seen a similar game. I thought it would be interesting to have a management game where the characters you manage have a will of their own and where there are conflicts between them. That you can't manage them through. I found that an exciting idea. The scenario came afterwards. I built a small prototype for it. And then it was in the drawer for a few years because it wasn't very good, and I didn't really know what to do with it. That was a couple of years ago, long before we started with the basic concept for the resistance game.

The scenario came about because I read a book about civil resistance. And I thought it fit so well, and it's a story worth telling. That was the idea for the concept. I dug out the concept again at the end of 2016 when Trump became president and where I thought: Boy, now I can't just make entertaining games anymore. I have to try to do something now. And then I remembered the concept and showed it to a few people, including Sebastian, and from there it really started. But the original idea was to actually make a management game with people who have a personality.

That means the mechanics came first?

Yeah, you wouldn't think so, would you? But actually, it was like that. Sometimes it's very difficult to say what leads to what. They are vehicles that drive each other forward. Then you have a concept and think: Oh, wow, that fits perfectly.

Last question: Your new game *The Darkest Files* will be released at some point. Are you doing anything differently in terms of procedural rhetoric?

Yes, of course it has to be completely different. Of course, it has certain parallels as well. There will be a group again, but it has a completely different scenario and a completely different starting point. In contrast to *Through the Darkest of Times*, I'm not being persecuted, I'm the persecutor. It shifts the position from powerlessness to a position in which I can act. For this reason alone, it must be completely different. But actually, we are still at the beginning and we are still going wild about exactly how it will be. The basic concept came from the fact that after the end of *Through the Darkest of Times* we stood there and thought: Okay, and what happens now, both with the perpetrators and the victims? Because it has a bitter note: The war is over, the Nazis have been defeated. But they are actually all still here. And soon, many of them are back in office, have not been punished and have not been dealt with. Except for the few who were condemned in Nuremberg, but apart from that many remained undisturbed.

The core of *Through the Darkest of Times* is to resist and be in opposition to fascism and the core of *The Darkest Files* (at least that's my idea) is the rule of law. In computer games we are very often hangman, judge, prosecutor in one person. If someone has done something bad, we just shoot him. I think the interesting political idea behind *The Darkest Files* is that even the objectively worst criminals are not so easily brought to justice.

That's a perfect ending for the interview. You just made a plea for democracy and separation of powers. Thank you.

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