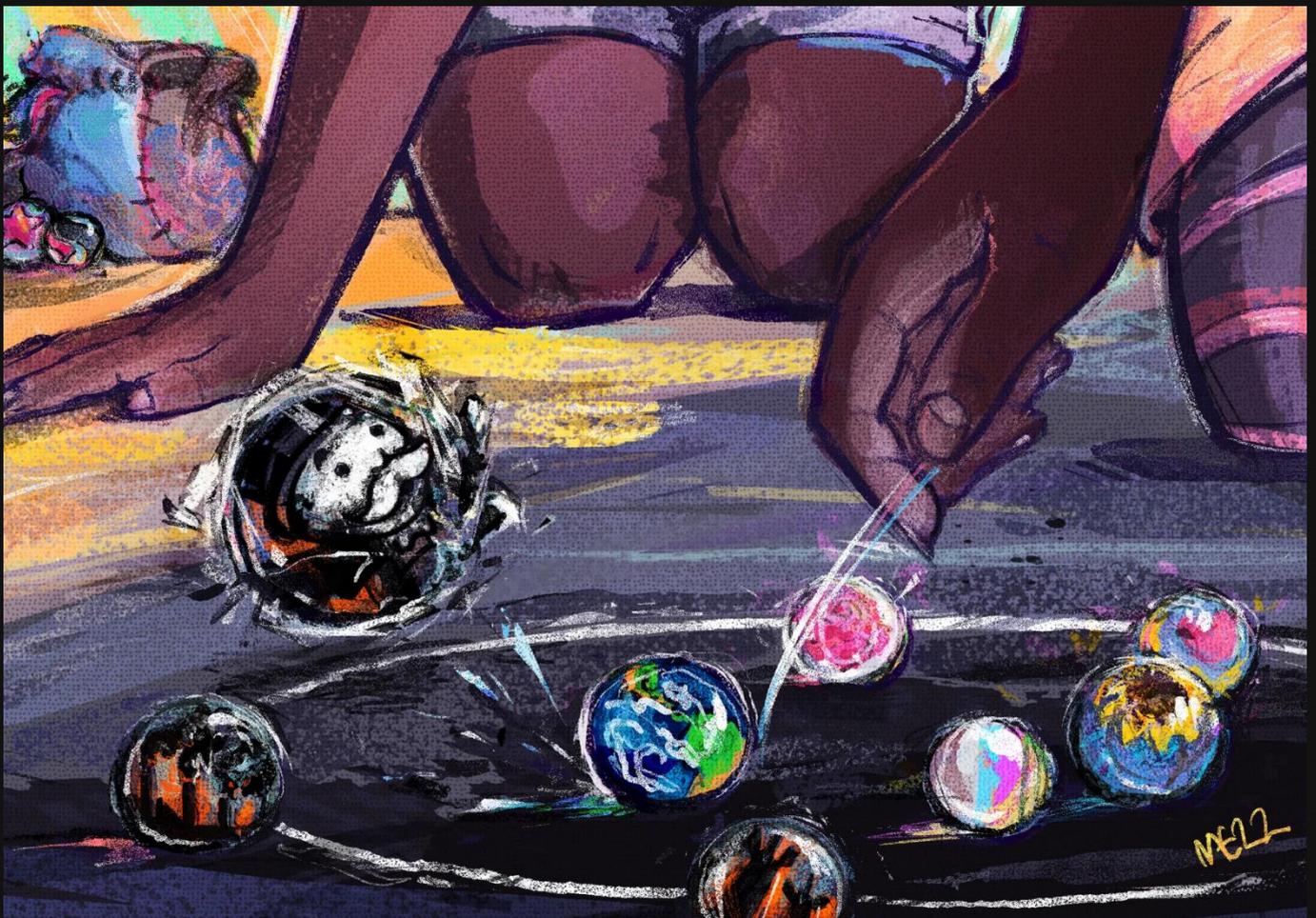Game environments

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Untitled. Illustration by Mika Edström

Special Issue

This Time it's for all the Marbles.

Towards Social Justice in Digital Gaming

edited by

Patrick Prax

Issue 17 (2022)

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Far Cry 5: Refusing its Own Politics

interview

Interview with Amanda Warner, designer of *Influence, Inc.*

Interview with Amanda Warner, Designer of *Influence, Inc.*

Patrick Prax

Abstract: Amanda just released *Influence, Inc.*, her second game about propaganda and media manipulation after her 2017 game *Fake it to make it*. In this interview, I am learning from her about how the game works in allowing players to explore propaganda, what Amanda´s aims with the game are, and how she thinks about games as a medium and their impact on politics. The interview has been conducted by Patrick Prax over Zoom on the 19th of April 2022, with additions and revisions through subsequent exchanges.

What kind of game is this that you are making here? How would you understand this as sort of a not a learning tool… How would you describe the game, maybe the genre?

My name is Amanda Warner. I am from Ohio in the US, where I spent the first 27 years of my life. Since then, I've moved a lot both within the US and around the world. Stockholm, Sweden has been my home for about four years.

With my earlier game, *Fake it to make it* (2017), I had more specific knowledge that I wanted people to come away with after playing. The game mechanics were tied to learning outcomes.

With *Influence, Inc.* (2022), my goal is for people to more generally think about the wider topic of propaganda and the modern systems that enable and amplify it. Instead of an educational game, I would call *Influence, Inc.* a thought-provoking game.

My high-level goals with this game are for people to look at and hopefully identify problems with existing systems of media, the way information spreads, and the way we monetize attention. I want people to be troubled by these systems after playing the game. But in *Influence, Inc.*, the game mechanics are not directly tied to learning objectives.

Why is there a step away from the outcome, the learning objectives?

I wanted more artistic freedom to make a game that was not as directly tied to reality… my feeling was that I could make a more interesting game that way. I'd like this game to appeal to an audience that already plays games, rather than a strictly educational audience.

It is about balancing fun and learning objectives?

Yeah I think so.

What do you mean when you say that you want people to be troubled by it?

There are a lot of games about media literacy that focus on individual action. They try

to teach people to fact-check or recognize disinformation online. There is much less focus on why disinformation spreads to begin with and the motivations for spreading it. To me, thinking about the 'why' is one of the most important pieces.

Another element that is generally ignored is the motivations that various media companies have to not put much effort into stopping disinformation and other harmful forms of propaganda. Most online media is funded through complex, ad-driven systems that favor emotionally charged messages. This means that dangerous, alarming, and polarizing messages can spread easily!

When you just focus on the tools and skills that people need to fact-check, then you are not getting to the root of the problem. Most people aren't going to fact-check regularly. It's time-consuming and challenging. Even for those who do, disinformation techniques will continue to evolve to be harder to detect. Without larger, systemic change, these types of problems are going to continue. So, I wanted to focus more on the why and how of the larger system of propaganda within online media.

When it comes to these larger systems, there isn't much that individuals can directly do on their own. So, my goal of *troubling* them is in the hopes that if people understand and care about these issues, they will be more likely to support policies and actions that will result in larger, systemic changes.

When I met you, you were presenting about *Fake it to make it*. What would you say is the message of *Fake it to make it* and what is the message on *Influence, Inc.*?

The message of *Fake it to make it* is that spreading polarized messages to provoke

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strong emotions is a way that people earn money through ad revenue. The overall idea is loosely based on real-life events, particularly the Macedonian teenagers who profited from fake news leading up to the 2016 election in the United States (Subramanian 2017).

With *Influence, Inc.* I wanted players to consider additional motivations for manipulating public attention. As you play, you encounter government officials, corporations, and various other actors offering you a variety of missions to influence citizens of the fictional country of Tiar.

One of the messages that I wanted to get across is that what we generally think of as corporate marketing and what we think of as propaganda are not actually so different. In part, this is because modern marketing techniques are based on propaganda techniques developed during the world wars. So, I wanted to play with that, with exposing some of those parallels between corporate marketing and government sponsored propaganda.

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Thank you. You mentioned that *Influence, Inc.* is also about the systemic, not just the individual. How does the game express the systemic conflict?

As you complete missions, you are interacting with game systems that are modeled on real-world systems. One of these is social media. In the game and in life, you can more easily spread certain messages on social media because the system favors messages that are emotionally charged. People are more likely to share those messages and social media algorithms are more likely to amplify them.

Figure 1: The Sharer team amplifying hashtags about a new album on social media

Social media companies also do not have much incentive to take down questionable messages and accounts because more emotion means more engagement means more profit for them. So, when there are signs of inauthentic behaviors, it is not in their financial interest to take effective action. According to whistleblower Sophie Zhang, there have also been situations where Facebook (2004) has protected accounts associated with political figures, even though these accounts were engaging in inauthentic activity (Wong 2021).

Another system in the game is online news media. Most online news is also funded through ad-revenue. This incentivizes publishing the news that will get the most clicks and views, leading to a focus on sensational, hot-this-moment stories, rather than stories about slower-moving but critical issues. Within this model, there also isn't much time and funds for in-depth investigation and reporting.
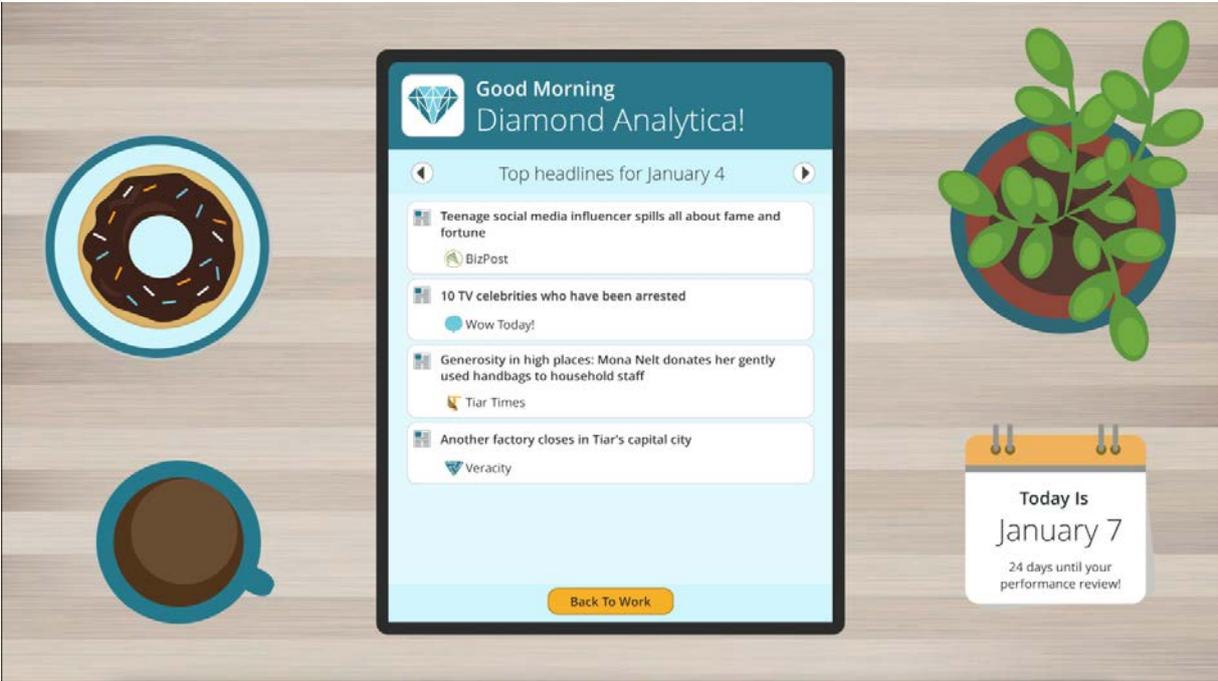
Figure 2: The top news headlines that appear at the beginning of each day

These systems are somewhat satirized and simplified in *Influence, Inc.* because it is a game. But I'd argue that these systems can also have absurd, concerning results in real life, and I hope players reflect on the parallels.

So, when I go and take a look at the core gameplay loop and the mechanics, you are talking about making something emotionally appealing. There is something that is called the *Viralizer*. Can you tell me how that works and what it is?

The *Viralizer* is a team of creative professionals that you have access to in the game. If you give them a press release or some other document they will come up with messages and forms that are more likely to spread on social media – for example, graphics, charts, and snappy hashtags. And then you can instruct your Sharer team to spread those messages on social media, using fake but highly convincing online personas.

Figure 3: The *Viralizer* team transforming a boring budget proposal into a catchy meme

Then you have the leaker that is about relaying information to established news outlets. But there are also other elements to this. So we have the *Targeter*.

The *Targeter* offers access to targeted advertising. Cambridge Analytica was a definite inspiration. Working with whistleblowers and academics, the journalist Carole Cadwalladr revealed how this company was able to create very precisely tailored messages, based on advanced personality models (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018). This type of targeted advertising was used during several elections, including the 2016 presidential election in the United States. The company's strategies likely included discouraging certain segments of the population from voting (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018, Timberg and Stanley-Becker 2020).

Figure 4: Targeted advertising being used to discourage a group from voting

And then we have of course, and that is my favorite tool, the

***Compromiser*. So, what does that friendly person do?**

Yes! The *Compromiser* is a contractor whom you give a topic or a person for

additional research. Sometimes you will get back hidden information from this

person's past. You might share this information yourself or leak it to the press.
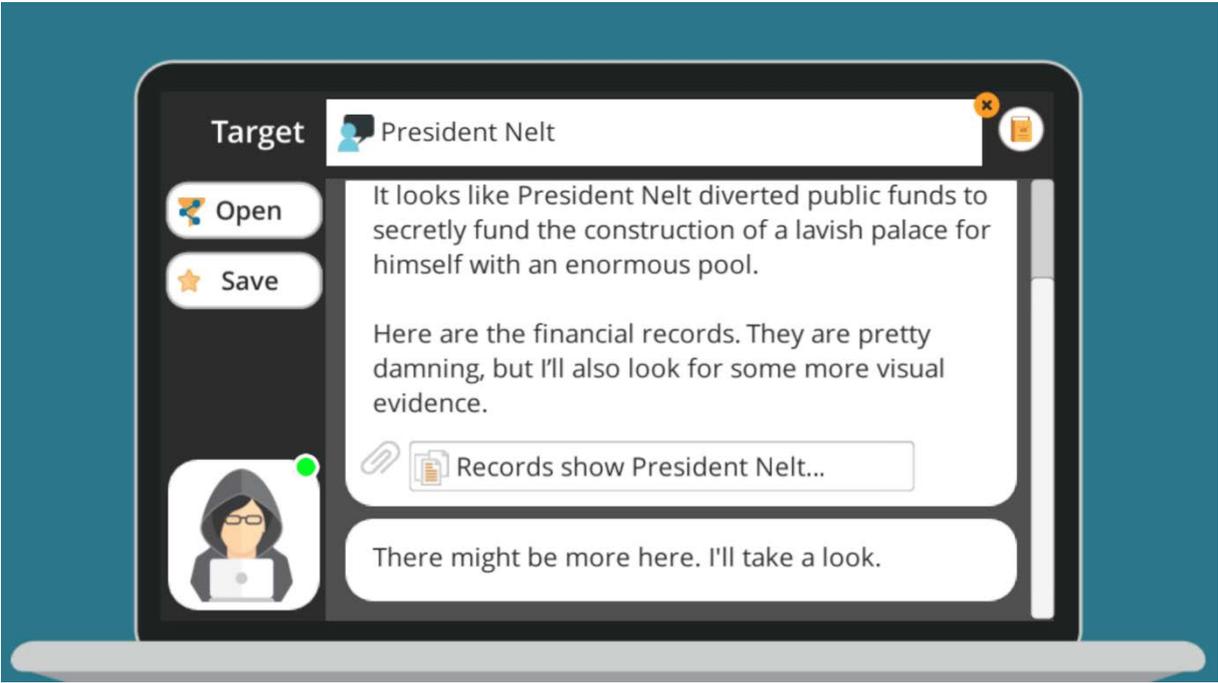
Figure 5: Information from the *Compromiser* about a secret palace

In other cases, the *Compromiser* will create manipulated data for you. I'll give an example based on the real-life actions of tobacco and fossil fuel industries (Oreskes and Conway 2010), fictionalized into a mission for the company FizzyFocus within the game. Say you had a scientific paper that did not show what you wanted. The *Compromiser* will skew the way the data is analyzed, find a scientist to sign off, and give you a new scientific paper that supports the findings you favor!

So basically, if you need extra information, whether true or not, the *Compromiser* is the person to talk to within the game.

What is the systemic issue we are trying to deal with in the game here? Is it about technology? Is it about culture? Is this about economy?

It is a mix of those. I do not think that technologies like the ones we have been

discussing are inherently bad. But they have absolutely made it easier to create and quickly spread disinformation, polarizing messages, and other forms of propaganda. And, as before, the way most online media is monetized creates a biased system that amplifies and spreads this type of information even further. These are not systems of media that encourage nuanced conversation and long-term planning.

There is a path through the game where you are using technology in a way that I would say is good. Real-world social movements have used online technologies to uncover important and concerning information and then share it with the public. I'm very interested in the idea of hacking as a democratic initiative and recommend the book *Coding Democracy* by Maureen Webb (2020).

Figure 6: A mission from the protestors requesting that information about election fraud be leaked to the press

Another example is protestors who have used technology both to mobilize people and to show what is really happening during protests. With phone cameras and social media, it's possible to document and share instances of police violence, for example.

You are mentioning police violence as a reference to the Black-Lives-Matter protests and other activist uses, right?

Yeah, that is a good example. Arab Spring protestors also used online technology to spread messages, bring people to protests, and show police and government violence during those protests (for contrasting perspectives on the complex role of social media in the Arab Spring specifically and political movements more generally, consider: Alterman 2011, Comunello and Anzera 2012, Hounshell 2011).

And the flipside of the Arab Spring is that it also made it possible for surveillance mechanisms to find the people, like from the government perspective.

Absolutely. And I have also read concerns about the speed and ease with which protest movements can form using social media. On the surface, this might seem positive. However, social media activism can encourage more casual, short-term activism. Groups do not necessarily develop the tighter ties needed for a longer-lasting social movements. So, I am definitely not saying that social media and other technologies are perfect tools for protest. There are opportunities for positive uses, for challenges, and for abuses. The book *Twitter and Teargas* by Zeynep Tufekci (2017) is a fascinating exploration of some of these.

Going away a little bit from the message you want to convey to how it is conveyed: So how does the game express its message?

With purposeful subtlety. You are introduced to the idea that you are running a special division of a larger company. Your division is sort of like a hip marketing

agency. There is cheerful music. Everything is bright and colorful and nice. I wanted to frame the game as: You are not thinking of going out to enact evil unto the world. That is not your goal. Your goal is to go out and make money and complete missions. In the real world, I think that many people who are spreading disinformation or other forms of propaganda for profit don't have 'evil' intentions. They may see it more as offering marketing services, like giving the client what they need! The paper *Architects of Disinformation* by Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Vincent A. Cabañes (2018) is a nuanced, fascinating look at this in the Philippines. I am not trying to demonize individual workers in this game.

Anyway, as you spend a month in this fictional country of Tiar, making money and completing missions, you slowly begin to see how your decisions impact the country and its citizens.

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Do you have an example for these feedback systems?

There is sitting president of Tiar. He starts out by asking you to popularize the renovation of a heritage site. Which sounds lovely, right? There is nothing wrong with that. But as you continue you learn that there are anti-corruption protests in this country. The president is now asking you to distract from those protests.

Later on, if the sitting president loses the election, he wants your help again to promote the idea that he actually won. And as you play you probably begin to notice more articles about the protests, about the economy, about what is happening in this country as it slides towards authoritarianism. Without giving too much away, the situation can get much more dire depending on the choices that you make.

Figure 7: News showing differing stories about the results of the presidential election

The similarities to the president in the US losing the election and
then asking for help with that…

I originally wrote that mission into the game before that happened! Not that I am
claiming to have predicted it. And I eventually incorporated ideas and themes from
the US 2020 election into the game. It was fascinating material. But one of the things
that I noticed while researching this game is that similar events happen over and over
again in so many similar ways in so many different countries. The slide towards
authoritarianism is not the same in all places, but there are so many parallels.

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Figure 8: The Viralizer team, working to fulfill a request to revise the public perception of the election results

OK, and you mentioned that it is based on reality but to get more freedom you stepped away from that a little bit. Why do you make this as a game?

Games are great for helping people explore how systems work. With computer games you can put the mechanics in the background to create a space where people can experiment with choices. Since there are so many real-world systems involved, I think that this topic lends itself very naturally to a game! I also hope that a game has the potential to reach people that other forms, like articles or books on the topic, might not.

So, there is a reach difference. Ok, so how do you work as a designer? How does your design process work?

In this case, I have been working on this game for over three years now. Not full-time. I have been working on client projects for about half of my time and then on this game for the remainder of my time.

I started with the idea that I was going to create a game about marketing and advertising, as a corporate form of propaganda. My initial research focused on the tobacco industry and fossil fuel industries. Among other things, I was interested in their use of doubt, astroturfing, and massive amounts of funds to delay regulation and continue selling their products in the meantime. Over time, I realized that I also wanted to the game to explore authoritarianism and other erosions of democracy. This meant adding government clients and examples, in addition to the original corporate clients.

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I did a lot of research! I have a bibliography in the game credits of some of the books I found super-inspiring for this project. I also have helpful, kind connections who put out calls to researchers and experts who work with populism, protests, and authoritarianism. Several of these researchers agreed to review the in-progress game. This gave me feedback that helped to shape the final content. I particularly wanted to make sure I was representing protestors and protests movements responsibly.

In terms of how I work, I start prototyping very early. I like to build prototypes and put them in front of people to see what works and what doesn't. Then I use that feedback to make another prototype! I have merged research, design, and development continuously over these three years. I'm very iterative, and the concept for the game has evolved significantly over time.

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So, you do real testing-based design, having people play it?

Absolutely. Early on, I would build part of a tool, put it in front of someone and be like: Ok, play with this. Let me see how you interact with it. What do you think and what do you try? During the pandemic, I had friends recording themselves playing the game and then sending me the videos. I would watch, take notes, and use them to refine the interface, tools, and content. I was disappointed at first that during the pandemic in-person testing was less feasible. In the past, I had relied on this! But actually, the videos are fantastic. People were less self-conscious when I was not actually present. They are just talking out loud as they play. It has been a great method of playtesting.

Last time we talked you mentioned a dystopia that does not look dark. Why did you make it like that?

There are a lot of great games where dystopias look dark – games like *Beholder* (2016), *This War of Mine* (2014), and *Papers, Please* (2013). I think that is a perfectly fine path to take. But I think there are scary things about the world today that do not necessarily look alarming on the surface. Social media. Marketing. Consumerism. Online shopping. The freedom of the gig economy. Or at a more societal level, our obsession with growing economies, even when it causes us to make choices that are dangerous for the environment and our long-term existence. People are excited about connections, growth, opportunities, purchases, and making money! But things that don't look dark on the surface can have very dark sides to them. And that is what I wanted to explore by starting out brightly, modernly capitalistic and then over time showing the consequences of choices.

Is this meant as a trap for players to play along a little bit and then sort of realize: "Oh my god! What did I do?"

Yes, it is! Most people that I watched playtesting have not felt angry about being trapped, but they have had moments of regret and rethinking. Here is an example of one path. First, there are a couple of missions for a corporation where players are asked to share hashtags to promote a productivity drink. The missions are just: Spread these online. We'll pay you. And then later on: Ok, now focus on the economy and use that to convince people who are scared of job loss to buy more drinks. At this point, often the player says: Wait a second! That sounds bad! Why did I say yes to some of these missions before? And they have a moment of reflection on earlier choices as well.

Figure 9: A request from FizzyFocus corporation to motivate drink purchases using fears of job loss

In this game, the ethical dilemmas slowly ramp up over time. The things that you are asked to do become increasingly dire. At the same time, the game does not at any point force you to accept any of the missions. And there is a path through the game

that is a much more positive path.

I kind of hope that most players won't get that more positive path the first time they play, and I haven't seen them do so during playtesting. Most of the time players just start by saying: Yep, whatever, I am going to do what people ask me. I am going to earn money! But I would like players to get to the end, reflect on what happened, and then try something very different. As sort of an exercise in asking, "What are the other options within this system?"

You have never seen people take that path for the first time. Why do you think that is?

Because it doesn't fit within the script of what you would typically do in a game. This game says: Here is a mission. Would you like to make money? Here is another mission. Would you like to make more money? Taking the alternate path requires you to specifically decide to not take certain missions and to turn down certain money.

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How much can you really choose your path? Is there any impact on the player in the review or do they lose funding?

This is absolutely a place where the game departs from reality. You do not get a bad review if you don't make money. You get a different review. In the real world, if you were actually a division of a company, then your division would probably be shut down if you stopped pursuing profit. So, I did take creative license and gave the player more freedom within the game.

Evil corporations that make the energy drinks and it swaps from "Hey, this is an energy drink!" to "Let's give people serious anxiety about their jobs so that they feel that they need to stay awake and work to keep their jobs." Why this choice?

Partially because my original idea was to have a game about corporations doing dubious things, in the style of the tobacco industry and the fossil fuel industry. So, I might have ramped that up quickly. But I also think this is not entirely unlike actual marketing techniques.

I designed corporate training for many clients in an earlier portion of my career. For one course, I remember that we were working with a marketing team at a pharmaceutical company, and they were very focused on the *emotional hook* component of convincing doctors to prescribe a medication to their patients. So, the idea of manipulating someone's emotions to get them to do or buy something is not far-fetched. I helped train marketing teams to do that.

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Do you now make games to make up for your contribution in that?

In a way, yes! That is one of the big reasons that I left that job. I was not always comfortable with what I was helping the clients to do. And yes, I now do make games that explore some of the elements that concerned me.

So what kind of effect are you hoping to get from people playing that game? So maybe first individual for the player. What do you want them to take away?

I would like them to take away a better understanding of how and why people try to manipulate public attention and emotions. Even though the game events are not exactly what they will encounter in the real world, there will be parallels. In the future, there will be more presidents who declare themselves still as president after having lost an election. There will be more companies that revise scientific facts to sell more products. The patterns are there, even if the details differ.

As before, I'd also like people to understand that the very structure of online media systems makes it easier to spread emotionally charged disinformation and other forms of propaganda.

The other idea that I'd like people to take away is a bit less defined. I'd like people to consider their options for not participating in harmful systems. In the game, this means turning down missions to explore a different path. In my life, this meant shifting my career to focus on the type of projects that I want to support.

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There is an alternative path. You do not actually have to follow the money.

Yeah! And again, I am not saying it's always a real-world option. For many people, work allows them to provide for the basic needs of themselves and their families. I don't judge individuals for making choices that allow them to do this.

But, for other people in more economically advantaged situations, there is more flexibility to consider less obvious options, rather than chasing the most money or the most success. And, at a societal level, I think we absolutely need to rethink what we pay attention to and pursue if we want a chance of avoiding catastrophic climate

change.

What kind of effect would you like to reach more broadly? Is there some impact on culture or society more generally that you have in mind?

It would be great if there were more discussions about media eco-systems and their consequences, not just among players but people in general. So, perhaps someone plays and then talks to their relatives or friends about some of the underlying concepts in the game. Or, perhaps students play the game individually and then come together to discuss as a class.

You mention that the game tackles serious topics, but appeals to wider audiences, so this sort of reach. What could success look like for *Influence, Inc.*?

I do not have hard numbers. While I would like the game to appeal to mainstream players, I also acknowledge that I am creating a niche commercial game. I'm uncertain how it will sell over time!

That was one part of the answer, the sales. But is there any other passage, like festivals where things can be presented? Are there other pathways to get the message across?

Yes, I will submit it to festivals and competitions, like Games for Change and IndieCade. I am also reaching out to people who have used *Fake it to make it* in the

classroom to see if they would be interested in using *Influence, Inc.* as well. I would love for it to be used as part of curriculums.

I wanted to ask why you are personally doing that. I think we had some of that earlier, which is redemption for past sins…

Laughs.

Sorry!

No! It's ok!

Is there anything else for why you are doing specifically this?

It probably goes back to *Fake it to make it*. This new game is an add-on, an expansion to that venture. I created *Fake it to make it* after the 2016 election in the United States when I was just in horror about what happened and wanted to create a game about fake and polarizing news. It was something I cared about and felt strongly about in that moment.

Influence, Inc. is more broadly about the larger issues that I also very much care about but could not fit into *Fake it to make it*. There were just so may angles to this topic, so I came back to it! And, honestly, it might not be done. I've considered creating a follow up game that focuses on climate denial and greenwashing. But I'm also feeling a little burnt out on this topic. So, we'll see!

I am also more generally interested in expanding the concept of how games can express ideas and provoke thoughtful reflection. So, *Influence, Inc.* is also an exploration of that.

Do you have plans to release the game just as it is or does it come with supporting material for a briefing or de-briefing or something like that?

I would like to build some kind of curriculum material around *Influence, Inc.* I mentioned earlier that many people helped review the content of the game. Some were professors who expressed interest in using the game in their classes. And I've already had an inquiry about licensing for academic use.

The curriculum is not going to be something immediately available on release, but it is something I would like to build eventually with the help of others who would be using it.

For *Fake it to make it*, I did not build a supporting curriculum directly, but the game is used in many classrooms. I also know that for the German translation, the team funding the translation created extra materials for teachers to use (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung n.d.).

What do you think games can do about issues like the ones discussed in this special issue?

Some of the key uses that I see for games for social justice are raising awareness and building… well, not outrage exactly, but indignation. Games can create environments

to explore what is happening currently and inspire new ideas for alternatives. So, awareness, indignation, and inspiration! Games can also be great tools for building specific skills and knowledge, in the right form and context.

However, my perspective is likely biased towards the types of single-player games that I've created. For example, there are also opportunities that come from directly bringing people together in multi-player games, to exchange ideas and even organize.

So where can we play *Influence, Inc.*?

Influence, Inc. is available for purchase on Steam (2003) and Humble (2010). I'm glad to offer bulk academic discounts, too! There is more information about the game at https://www.influenceincgame.com/.

Thank you!

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