

# Fictional publicness : A possible way out of practice in game

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**Abstract:** It can be observed that in recent years, through scientific communication and philosophical practices, various approaches to communicating with the public have emerged. Although these approaches have emphasized bilateral interaction, such as citizen consensus and deliberative democracy, various interactive media that introduce scientific knowledge, and numerous workshops or philosophical cafes that involve open discussion, these forms basically assume active good citizens and emphasize the formation of the public domain. These practices formulate objectiveness through a space of public discussion as well as assume discussion participants to be subjects capable of rational discussion. However, in many public discussions, the definition of social relationships is commonly observed to influence the style of discussion formulated. Whether the form of public discussion also limits the selection of discussion topics is debatable. French scholar Laurent reviewed the citizen conferences on nanotechnology. This question regarding nanotechnology is not only relevant to this topic. It reveals a fundamental question: how do citizens become aware of the relationship between publicness and their rights and obligations? Based on this question, a few concepts in philosophical practices can be referred to, using dialogue-based transformation and Foucault's idea of viewing events as opportunities to inspire public awareness in order to conceive a mechanism that guides the public to engage in public affairs. Specifically, this study intends to explore a possible model that triggers actions through creative thinking. Here, we use gamification to discuss this possible mechanism. Regarding the implications of gamification as a theory of philosophical practices, we must consider whether games can serve as a field of practice for publicness. Thus, we explore whether it is possible to create game events for people to think about public issues, as well as to guide the public to further engage in discussions in the public domain, formulate decisions and actions to be implemented in the real world, and train themselves to be citizens capable of rational discussions.

**Keywords:** storytelling, philosophical practice, virtual publicness, board games

## 1. Introduction

Through scientific communication and philosophical practices, various approaches to communicating with the public have emerged in recent years. Although these approaches have emphasized bilateral interaction, such as citizen consensus and deliberative democracy (Lin & Chen, 2003), various interactive media that introduce scientific knowledge, and numerous workshops or philosophical cafes that involve open discussion, these forms basically assume active good citizens and emphasize the formation of the public domain. These practices formulate objectiveness through a space of public discussion as well as assume discussion participants to be subjects capable of rational discussion (Lin, 2005). However, in many public discussions, the definition of social relationships is commonly observed to influence the style of discussion formulated (Lin, 2012). Whether the form of public discussion also limits the selection of discussion topics is debatable. French scholar Laurent reviewed the citizen conferences (la conférence de citoyen) on nanotechnology. Before its promotion of nanotechnology in 2013, France had organized two citizen conferences, one in 2006 and the other in 2009 (Laurent, 2010). Laurent compared these citizen conferences with those held in the United States and performed an analysis. He claimed that such a form of public discussion has three problems: (1) it is difficult to organize such large-scale public discussions; (2) such a form of discussion facilitates the formulation of objective and neutral good citizens but has difficulty reflecting citizens' concrete and real opinions in conference reports; and (3) such conferences are typically funded or organized by

governmental agencies, and thus their standpoints and viewpoints can hardly be severed from governmental agenda (2010). By identifying the problems underlying citizen conferences, Laurent suggested a new type of public mobilization; that is, viewing everyone as a concern of nanotechnology projects (Laurent, 2010). He indicated that nanotechnology is an emerging technology that requires cross-departmental and interdisciplinary collaboration (Inspection générale de l'administration de l'éducation nationale et de la recherche, 2004; Brossais & Panissal, 2013). Because of nanotechnology's characteristics, it cannot be comprehensively included in any traditional fields, which not only influences internal scientific knowledge but also external social aspects. Therefore, from the aspects of public communication and teaching, scholars begin asking the following question: does nanotechnology require a different measure of response (Laurent, 2010; Brossais & Panissal, 2013; Bensaude-Vincent, 2012)?

This question regarding nanotechnology is not only relevant to this topic. It reveals a fundamental question: how do citizens become aware of the relationship between publicness and their rights and obligations? Based on this question, a few concepts in philosophical practices can be referred to, using dialogue-based transformation and Foucault's idea of viewing events as opportunities to inspire public awareness in order to conceive a mechanism that guides the public to engage in public affairs. Specifically, this study intends to create a mechanism that triggers actions through creative thinking. Here, we use gamification to discuss this possible mechanism.

Regarding the implications of gamification as a theory of philosophical practices, we must consider whether games can serve as a field of practice for publicness instead of merely being a teaching aid. Thus, we explore whether it is possible to create game events for people to think about public issues, as well as to guide the public to further engage in discussions in the public domain, formulate decisions and actions to be implemented in the real world, and train themselves to be citizens capable of rational discussions.

## 2. The process of engagement: storytelling in games

Regarding storytelling in games, the author proposes approaching from the development of digital games. After half a century of development, narrative games have distinguished themselves from conventional goal-driven games to become one of the indicators of contemporary games. Writer Tom Bissell tailored the script for *Gears of War: Judgement*, a game produced by Microsoft Studios. Although players rated this version of the game as inferior to its three previous installments, their feedback primarily focused on an unfavorable interface design that imposes interruptions on a smooth narrative rhythm. Hence, players were still highly interested in the story of the game and were looking forward to a more comprehensive narrative experience (Lee, 2014)

Lee noted that compared with other conventional media, games feature a relatively powerful narrative capacity. Lee used books and movies as objects of comparison to illustrate the advantage of games<sup>1</sup>. According to Lee, when readers read books or newspapers, they only absorb single-dimensional story images. Movies, however, add a second dimension: sensory experiences. In other words, books can be viewed as storytellers, and readers engaging in reading listen to a story that has already happened from a third-person perspective; furthermore, all images of the story can only be imagined by the readers using their imagination. With the assistance of visual and audio effects, movie audiences can adopt a second-person viewpoint to experience the story vividly along with movie characters.

In addition to possessing the characteristics of the two previous types of media, games introduce a third dimension, interactivity, which constitutes its primary advantage. If movies allow participants to view a story from a second-person perspective, games enable participants to directly interact with the story from a first-person perspective. The participants are no longer passive viewers of the story but active participants of the game world who can affect its operation through their behaviors<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <https://hitboxteam.com/designing-game-narrative>

<sup>2</sup> The inner process of people interacting with media may be complicated, however Lee here points out what is important for motivations is to decide what is going to happen next, not just to follow the story.

Storytelling in games refers not only to story narratives but also to various story elements, such as operations, dialogues, images, and music, which together enable participants to deeply engage with the games, experience emotional fluctuations, and learn about the framework of the game worlds. Hence, it is not enough to insert a story into a game; story elements must be arranged in appropriate places to allow participants to feel they are part of the game, and are therefore willing to invest time to complete their stories. Only this fulfills the intention of storytelling in games. Bissell (2014) shared a similar point of view in an interview:

A game is basically about the connections among the players, the game world, and the central game mechanic. It is about creating a space where players can get involved in the mechanic, and the way the world responds to the players' engagement should be fun and intriguing, even producing a sense of agency. Based on this, story writing in a game is about creating an ambience and a sense of basic goals. The players can roughly detect the so-called author's intention, but the right of the creator must ultimately be conferred to the players. It applies to all games. I believe good game writing means not getting in the players' way. (Bissell, 2014)

In sum, what is favorable storytelling in games? By comparing gamification and storytelling in games, the author suggests defining it as *a type of storytelling that renders game participants willing to interpret and respond to authors' hidden messages; furthermore, participants would change their understanding after they interact with the messages, and change their behaviors.*<sup>3</sup> In the following subsections, the author takes digital games and board games as examples to elucidate how games and players interact with each other through storytelling.

## 2.1 Case analysis on storytelling in games: An example of digital game

### a. *Detention*<sup>4</sup>

*Detention* is an adventure thriller game produced by a Taiwanese Team, Red Candle Games, in 2017. Based on the martial law period in Taiwan (1949–1987), this game centers on female protagonist Rui-Xin Fang and her investigation into why her classmate hung himself. She roamed the campus, which forced her to face hidden secrets in her mind. Adopting the context of white terror (the suppression of political dissidents during Taiwan's martial law period) and presenting Taiwanese folklore, ghost stories, and social topics, this game is filled with consideration for local issues. In addition to viewing reconstructed Taiwanese landscapes in the 1960s, participants are exposed to Taiwanese deities such as the Seventh Lord and the Eighth Lord, Taiwanese customs such as “the rice prepared for the recently deceased and placed by the feet of the deceased,” and Taiwanese ballads such as *Wang Chunfeng*. In this game, players control Fang to fight against various demons and monsters as the story unfolds to reveal the truth. However, behind these scenes of insanity lies the protagonist's prison of the mind as well as the sadness of the time.

The producer of *Detention*, Yao Shun-Ting, expressed that this game was first inspired by George Orwell's *1984*, and was intended to be a dystopian work based on a Taiwanese context. In addition to representing the ambience of omnipotent suspicion and fear during the white terror period, Yao included campus bullying, family problems, and romantic relationships in the game, topics that have existed throughout history. As the plot unfolds, these topics are presented to players sequentially in the form of riddles, forcing them to reflect upon whether they have unintentionally inflicted harm on others or been subjected to such harm themselves, all while simultaneously solving the riddles. As the game's English name suggests, detention not only refers to being detained at the school but also to being detained in past wounds.

*Detention* received great attention domestically and abroad after its official launch. In addition to being played on the channels of some Western streamers, a novel and a movie of the game will be released, creating numerous opportunities to discuss the history of that time, which used to be a forbidden topic. Therefore, with appropriate storytelling techniques, a game can exert influence on the real world and receive profound feedback.

## 2.2 Case analysis on storytelling in games: Examples of board games

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<sup>3</sup> The texts are italicized by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from <https://redcandlegames.com/detention>

### *a. Trains*<sup>5</sup>

Game designer Brenda Brathwaite mentioned in her speech that “the mechanic is the message.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, through the rules and interactive process of the game, players can experience the cultural reflections the designer imbedded in the game. She designed six games as a series to explore the dark history of human culture. Here, the author discusses her most famous game, *Trains*.

In this game, each player finds a typewriter placed in front them, on which game rules are written. For each round, the players must throw a die to decide the number of people who embark on a train. They then must stuff yellow dolls whose size is larger than the train car’s entrance into the car, and ensure that the train is heading toward its destination. In this game, the designer incorporated means for the players to disrupt their competitors’ plans, such as causing derailment of other players’ trains or taking out their yellow dolls. All players who actually played the game cheered when they hindered their competitors’ progress. Amid this pleasant competition, when the trains arrived at the terminal station and the name of the station was revealed, the players’ mood quickly turned to embarrassment or even anger because the train stop read Auschwitz. At that moment, the players immediately grasped the reality behind this game.

Brathwaite wished to use this game to have players relive the history of the German army blindly participating in the massacre of the Jews under the instruction of Hitler. Brathwaite was diligent about accessory design. For example, she presented a replica of a Nazi typewriter, the table covered with shattered glass, and the yellow dolls that each represented tens of thousands of Jews. The players simply followed the instructions on the typewriter, happily and unknowingly sending Jews to concentration camps such as Auschwitz. The game hinted that the accomplices of that massacre might have also treated reality as a game according to a similar mentality. Therefore, European players who were familiar with this cruel episode in history were naturally ashamed of the truth, and even left the game in anger.

The author considered that although such a design has its own story, the approach of turning the story in a game is not entirely satisfactory. In this game, players experience emotional fluctuations and participate in the unfolding of the event. However, they cannot understand the cause of that event, nor can they conceive methods to change fate. The author is aware of the major challenge that games, or more specifically educational games, face in simultaneously presenting details and the overall context. In addition to presenting the consequences, such games should inform participants of the causes, which can then serve as a basis for changing the status quo.

### *b. De Vulgari Eloquentia*<sup>7</sup>

The aforementioned examples have demonstrated two key points of game design: (a) the participants’ control of the game, and (b) the participants’ motivation to improve game performance. In *Trains*, the first problem is the luck involved in throwing dice; participants cannot make strategic plans, leaving them with no sense of control, simply becoming agents of the dice. Second, the ending has been written, and its purpose is to create an emotional gap at the moment the station’s name is revealed; however, the game does not include possibilities for its participants to revert this sad ending.

*De Vulgari Eloquentia*, a game designed by the Italian designer Mario Papini and named after Dante’s thesis, describes the process of dialect unification in Italy in late Middle Ages. Players assume the role of businessmen in the game. Various regions in Italy spoke different dialects at that time. For the purpose of trading with other businessmen in different regions, businessmen spoke a common language designated as the businessmen’s language. Therefore, players must travel between regions of Italy marked with different colors (representing different dialects) to produce a colorless collection of proverbs by the end of the game. The game ends when the Pope dies, after which Italy no longer has language barriers between regions.

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<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from <http://brenda.games/>

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/brenda\\_brathwaite\\_gaming\\_for\\_understanding](https://www.ted.com/talks/brenda_brathwaite_gaming_for_understanding)

<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.giochix.it/scheda.php?item=2610&lingua=1>

After participating in this game, the author considers that *De Vulgari Eloquentia* avoids the disadvantages of *Trains* by its design:

(a) No dice throwing is involved. Each player can act five times, and players must select the moves they wish to make and the priorities of these moves. Accordingly, the game does not include uncontrollable tools; the progress of the game is only affected by individual choices and other players' decisions. Such a design method prevents players from attributing the gaming result to luck. From beginning to end, each step is based on the players' choices; hence, the actions the players take determine the responsibilities they must shoulder.

(b) Apart from reduced randomness, European games differ from American ones in the manner of interaction among players. In *Monopoly* and *Trains*, players can all snatch resources from their competitors or cause direct harm to their competitors' status quo. However, the European game emphasizes interaction with the world. *De Vulgari Eloquentia* does not incorporate any means of attacking; instead, the game allows players to do their best, competing to create their own scoring engine in the shortest time. That is, interaction replaces conflicts.

(c) Following on from the previous point, because no score- or resource-snatching mechanisms are provided in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, each player sees their scores increase over rounds as well as differences in increased scores of other players, which are the results of different choices. Therefore, players can understand the possibilities as well as increases or decreases in efficacy generated by dissimilar decisions. Because of positive interaction and cultural beauty, players will be willing to participate in the game again and can expect to perform more satisfactorily.

Based on these points, the author claims that a good game not only creates a sense of achievement in its players but also triggers them to actively discuss the game elements and attempt to improve their performance by playing again. Imagine what could happen if we incorporated global issues that require immediate resolution into the game world and have players explore and develop resolutions.

### 3. From board games to changing the world

The author hence offers a developing model of game-narrative interactions. The scope of games is constantly being redefined. From simple mechanic-driven games to fictional spaces based on a specific historical context, and further to designs based on real history in the contemporary period, games have evolved to allow players to experience intangible reality. From the perspective of media development, the dynamic relationship among games, players, and the world is illustrated in Fig. 1 as follows:

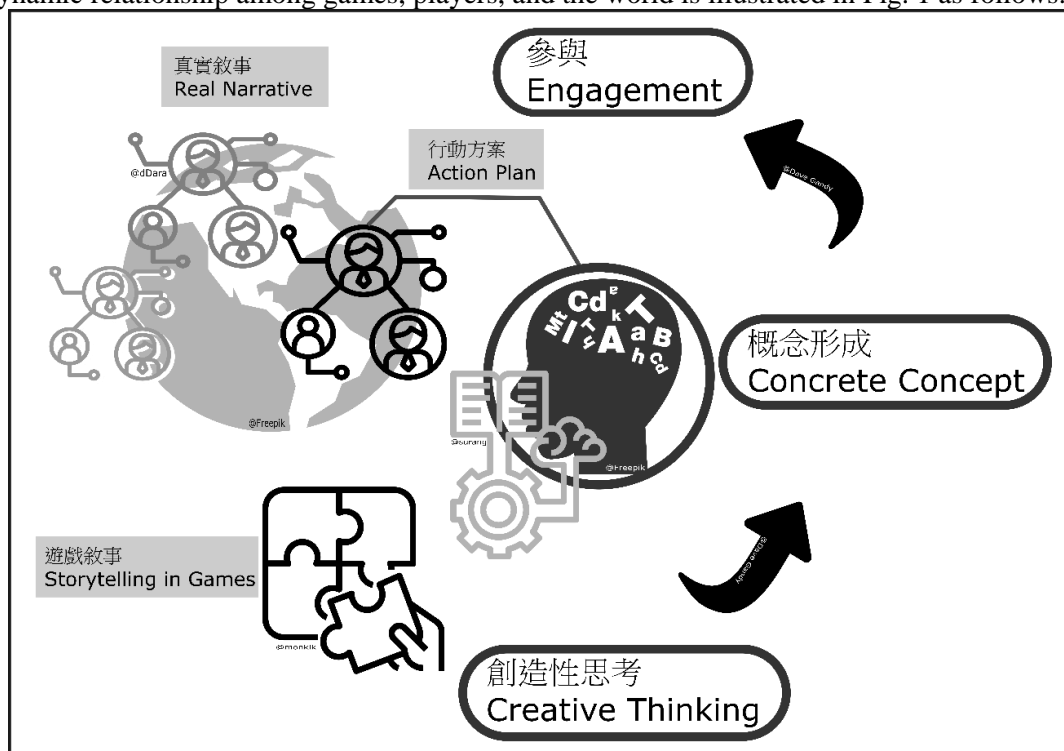


Fig. 1: (\*This figure was arranged and drawn by author)

When the media of reception develops from book to game, players are allowed to actively participate in the game world and experience real-time feedback about their choices. When elements of the real world are presented in a game, players can experience the influence of their behaviors on the world as the game unfolds, and the game will inexplicitly inform players of the actual events that took place and the causes behind them. However, the ending of a game is not always fixed. Players have a chance to prevent tragedy from occurring by making a different choice.

The greatest benefit of designers rebuilding part of the real world in games is that participants can become aware of the possibility to make the world a better place through making different choices. For example, when playing *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, players can experience how businessmen and priests became key figures in promoting dialect unification in Italy. Players in this game do not hurt one another; instead, they use all their might to interact with the world, through which they become a better self.

In addition to *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, many other European games have incorporated historical contexts. For instance, *London*<sup>8</sup> by Martin Wallace adopts as its context the construction of a new London after the Great Fire of London of 1666, allowing participants to understand the modernization of London over the course of 300 years. The game echoes *London Rising*, a book by Leo Hollis. The book describes five key people who modernized London and indirectly made it the benchmark of modernization. Similar to players in the game, these people did not directly change the appearance of London but promoted the evolution of London behind the scenes, and even created many other possible London cities by playing the game.

Because of the restraints of digital games, the author considers that the most optimal path for the design of games is to adopt the experience of storytelling in digital games, as well as to employ the form of board games without fixed endings.

#### 4. Conclusion

According to the aforementioned discussion, the aims of this study are to explore a way out for games to serve as a medium between truth (knowledge) and the public, as well as formulate public awareness of public issues. Games are not only treated as a medium for becoming familiar with topics, nor a warm-up activity before entering public communication, but are expected to become an event in themselves. This is because in an event, the following can be found:

In the context of interactive relationships and multiple strategies, how does the inseparableness between knowledge and power lead to uniqueness, which is determined according to their acceptable conditions, and also leads to certain possible, open, indecisive, reversible, and dislocated fields? Which of these fields renders such uniqueness fragile and temporary, and turn such effects into events and unquestionable events? (Foucault, 1978)

By designing a mechanic for experiencing events, analyzing the interactive relationship and multiple strategies the players have experienced, game designers can introduce the discussion of public issues. Participants would observe that such complexity cannot be left completely to experts for resolution, as well as that each citizen occupies a strategic place that can affect the scope to which this event spreads. In the following subsections, we review current game mechanics in Taiwan to locate and create a new game mechanic that satisfies the expected output of this project.

Habermas distinguished between instrumental rationality and communicative rationality (Dews, 1998). He claimed that unlike instrumental rationality, which was premised upon individual benefits, communicative rationality is centered on respect and employs discussion to formulate a consensus. Ogawa (2017) indicated three necessary principles of communicative rationality: participants talk in a natural language, they are honest, and they are in equal positions. These three principles can be practiced favorably in games as follows:

- a. The participants must follow the same rules for the game.
- b. The participants must face the challenges in the game honestly.
- c. The participants must all compete fairly in the game.

Through appropriate translation, games can be regarded as the terms indicated by Habermas (1984) “ideal speech situation.” As players continue to test strategies to determine the most satisfactory

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<sup>8</sup> Retrieved from <https://ospreypublishing.com/london>

one, they supposedly also transform the society into its most satisfactory state, thereby allowing it to step into a more favorable future.

In addition to the provision of an ideal speech situation, the author considered that the role of the game participants cannot be overlooked. The solutions Habermas proposed for social dilemmas are rooted in a collective society; hence, the achievement of this goal requires the rational capacity of individuals. From the perspective of participants' behavior, each choice that participants make changes the appearance of the game world (society). When participants learn that their choices engender unfavorable results for society, they can adjust their strategies in a timely manner and ensure the same mistakes are not repeated. If each selection is considered an improvement of ideal self-status, then the behavior of the participants in the game becomes a process of self-betterment. In European games, participants also start from nothing. Through continual interactions between individual choices and feedback from society, the participants finally formulate a perfect self and attain balance with the society.

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