Game Over: A Response to “Facechange”
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Having dedicated many youthful hours and quarters in arcades on games carefully crafted to keep players inserting more money, I remain skeptical about the winnability of some games. “Facechange” at first reminded me of such classic arcade-style games as “Pac-Man” and “Donkey Kong,” and the losses they incurred. After all, the mechanics of play are certainly familiar: the keys w-a-s-d substitute for a joystick’s up, left, down, and right features respectively. Even the soundtrack, Gotye’s “Somebody That I Used to Know” (featuring Kimbra), is sufficiently pop-ified to more readily fit into the genre of classical arcade than contemporary alternative. “Facechange,” nevertheless violates the expectancies associated with classical arcade gaming at a pivotal moment, when it greets players with something delightfully unexpected:

![Congratulations! You won the game!](image)

Fig. 1: Screenshot from “Facechange.” Winning the Game.

What?! No “to be continued?” Players are not coaxed into buying another game? Instead, they are reminded of what they could have done in the time spent playing “Facechange?”

Magnificent!

Will Tangney, Katie Tillner, David Hook, and Jacob Philpatt’s project offers a stinging critique of one emerging type of play, and the games likely to inspire it. They note: “we made a video game about how Facebook slacktivism is an ineffective mode of social change.” Through the miracles of social media, users can “like” if they agree with something, or “share” something they feel is important. Simple games can be built with nominal technical knowledge and distributed via social networks, permitting just about anyone to try their hand at building games that respond to the various issues of the day. However, unlike the critically informed play found in Ian Bogost’s procedural rhetorics or Jane McGonigal’s “primary platform for enabling
the future” (13), the genre Tangney, Tillner, Hook, and Philpatt describe does not offer meaningfully opportunities to play into serious matters. To what degree does slacktivism lead to substantively learning about social issues, their causes, or possible solutions? Time passes, “likes” are exchanged, and players are entertained, but as “Facechange” suggests, slacktivistic play probably does generate a corps of change agents. Players are unlikely to leave the game better equipped or informed.

Tangney, Tillner, Hook, and Philpatt’s ludic argument that slacktivism in its pejorative sense has infiltrated the world of gaming reaches its zenith when it invokes trivial stabs at pressing social issues. For examples, the game overlooks the concerns or causes of white-collar crime or e-censorship grotesquely. These matters serve as backdrops for the game, and do not inform the dynamics of the space. Players will be too busy moving their avatars along the trail of monetary icons to ask questions. Which, in ironically enough, invokes a sense of art imitating life.

Fig 2: Screenshot from “Facechange.” Rather than interrogate Wall Street, “Facechange” forces games to play through and collect rewards.

Fig 3: Screenshot from “Facechange.” Redacted texts are merely impediments to walk around.
Kenneth Burke’s begins “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle” with an admonishment to academics who dismissively engage in a form of “burning books” by “inattention” (191). It would be similarly easy to neglect slacktivistic play. “Facechange” forces us to back to the arcade to dump quarters into machines, and remain ill-equipped to respond to the boardwalk outside (but gleefully entertained). Tagney, Tillner, Hook, and Philpatt thus extend KB’s advice to “know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against” (191). Ultimately Tagney, Tillner, Hook, and Philpatt enter the gaming parlor most remarkably by illustrating a type of counter-productive play against which to guard, which burn the truly scarce assets required for purposeful action: time and attention. “Facechange” wittingly works within the genre to subvert it. In so doing, “Facechange” offers an approach to rehabilitative play within an otherwise irreverent style of gaming.

Even the most slacktivistic engagements can be won, it seems.

Works Cited

