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The two dimensions as a metaphor of control in gaming landscapes

Nowadays, the 3D is the main setting of the core game language. The engines that structure it are in the heart of economic discourses that cross the entire game industry¹. Compared to this, 2D (including the perspective visual) becomes a sort of nostalgic totem, able to account itself only in indie productions, on portable and/or low hardware and in famous sagas that use it as distinctive mark. But 2D is not only a residual, resistant memory characterized by an opposition to mainstream patterns in digital entertainment; again, it's not a mere simplification in gameplay in order to meet casual gamers' preferences.

2D is still here, if we see it not only as technology: even if our movement in virtual space is often three-dimensional (also correlated with iconic control and augmented reality that make real or semi-real the input system), our cognitive visualization still follows a map representation, even in AAA productions. Referring to Hall, culture is about conceptual maps and shared meanings, through two systems of representation

The first enables us to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things ... and our system of concepts, our conceptual maps. The second depends on constructing a set of correspondences between our conceptual maps and a set of signs, arranged or organized into various languages which stand for or represent those concepts...The process which links these three elements together is what we call representation².

Our conceptual maps have to meet the signal systems, which can present contiguity in form or not. In digital games representation is a configurative one, due to the basic interaction that structures the virtual experience. By the way our inner connections can find difficulties in contacting and find coherence in the settings that we live, all symbolic and linked to interpretation³. We are referring to the surfaces that frame our perspective in game, giving us directions in orienting intentions and actions.

For example, the map in ludic interface is an essential tool with the aim to understand the process on the screen, simply the *what's going on* excluding not essential details. Several times it's not only functional, but an aesthetic entity, source of engagement for the player. Furthermore, when the necessity of man-

1. Bogost, I. (2008). *Unit Operations*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

2. Hall, S. (1997). *The work of representation*. In S. Hall, *Representation: cultural representation and signifying practices* (pp. 13-74). London, UK: Sage, p. 19.

3. Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, San Francisco, CA: Chandler & Sharp.

age complex structures data results predominant, 2D is the best choice in order to improve the usability of the game system and test its core equilibrium (think about *League of Legends*⁴ or *Little Big Planet*⁵). The advantage of a dimension less is evident also in *Minecraft*⁶, whose 3D is poor and frugal in order to permit a clear consideration and lecture of its virtual landscape, a set of reactive data. In fact, 2D is characterized by a sort of evoking darkness, because it doesn't reveal anything as 3D does⁷. 2D conveys a feeling of control, a sort of elegant brightness, because we know it is a screen, a filter, an interpretation; something that 3D has to sacrifice, due to a third line that wants to report all, dress of modern times. The former is the source of dominion, a concentration; the later the dilated ground on which I have to move. This switch is still evident in digital games, and now the two dimensions may appear more attractive than in the past, also because they carry these values and, often, the indie (real or believed) making process ideology that becomes culturally significant referring to the diffusion of the casual gaming.

The relation between 3D and 2D visualization is more immediate if we use as criteria the situational maps (a sort of summing up of the situation in game outside the agency; in this medium they are often exteriorized and not only mental⁸) and their importance in interaction. We can observe two main function-types of these elements:

- Contingent *dispositif*: here the aim is to describe the situation in its urgency in gaming context. Their presence can be external (the number of life points) or internal (like indicative and dynamic colors or inner windows, like the armor in *Dead Space*⁹). Again, they can comport a suspension of the game (the inventory page) or not (the map in the screen corner).
- Temporal track: the goal is to trace the past of the gaming session (when I have reached some goal, the number of deaths, etc.), searching a feeling of ascendance about my experience and the need to fix what I have done (an element recurrent also in gamification logic, the quantification of my behavior).

We want to add a third type, the diorama's one: we are concerning to those maps which represent a filter able to symbolize the gaming situation in its entirety (in general or in a specific mode) and are active instruments in game sessions. It's a meta and/or lateral vision of the ludic experience that needs a distance from living virtual space, even if it's possible to contextualize them (like in the strategic session in *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*¹⁰). It is the same lens of several software created to study game metrics. Their main objective is the control one, a task that only 2D can solve for the actual usability; perhaps in future media literacy and medium evolution would change this situation.

We can see them working in a very different ways, concerning the type of game that we are analyzing. As said, 2D is more useful when I have to manage complex problems, but is less appealing for new *testosterone* audiences and the

4. Riot Games, USA, 2009.

5. Media Molecule, UK, 2008.

6. Markus Persson Markus Notch Persson, *Mojang*, Sweden, 2009–2011.

7. Baudrillard, J. (1980). *De la séduction*. Paris, France: Galilée.

8. Eugeni, R. (2010). *Semiotica dei media*. Rome, Italy: Carocci.

9. EA Redwood Shores, USA, 2008.

10. Ubisoft, France/Canada, 2011.

shift to third dimension can erase immersion (stop the game, change something in bi-dimensional frame, return to game; an heavy interface that remember me that it's all an illusion). By the way, this movement in order to manage the situation may help the active presence of the player¹¹. Furthermore, there are genres in which these jumps are more codified, and appear natural; we can observe a sort of constituent issues that mean domestication in game engagement, evident (concerning 2D tools of analysis) in families of games as strategic, simulation and role playing (RPG) ones. The paradox is that two dimensional approach is useful in general, also to rule AAA productions that try to make more complex themselves episode after episode (a quantitative expansion and the problem of qualitative control; the return of a more focused gameplay in *GTA IV*¹² after *GTA: San Andreas*¹³ is due to this). Again, every 2D perspective conveys a metaphor¹⁴ when in connection to other one (2D or 3D). To sum up and in the specific, dioramas are pictures of the world I habit that show different possibilities of action, in other words creative ways to build meanings with consequences in main gaming space. This connection can be positive and coherent, or not in synchrony with the rest of text.

There are some interesting cases that can help us to better understand what we are talking about:

- *Terraria*¹⁵ is an indie pure 2D experience that stress the bi-dimensional representation. The aim of the game is to explore an enormous world with a strong crafting system, through a classic platform visual. Here 2D is the metaphor of an entire culture, the nerd-geek one, that can be recollected in its encyclopedic dimension only with a reduction in graphic details. In this case, similar to *Minecraft*, the world is the set of data that I have to rule. All is revealed in its artificial essence (we may find similarities in modern or post-modern popular culture), and the 2D permits a pleasure of control also in front of the richness of details and elements. The wonder is indirect, filtered by a representation that offers an immediate computation (a procedural but also aesthetic *embrayage*).
- *Assassin's Creed: revelations*: the fourth episode of the acclaimed Ubisoft blockbuster has a strong 3D dimension, improving the aesthetic pleasure typical of this kind of products. By the way the strategic element, quite relevant in this game in the tower defense mode (where I have to move and lead troops), is served by a strong shift from third person as action to third person as point of view, fundamental to oriented the player's decisions in coordinate his group of assassins. This choice seems to be brave, if we observe that the tactic logic is external to the genre, trying to improve the deepness of the gameplay. But a lot of fans have attacked this feature, seen as an external intrusion (in mechanisms but also in consequent need to use different tools to introduce them) in a specific and established play model. The control that *Assassin's Creed*

11. Slater, M. (2003). *A note on Presence Terminology*. *Presence connect*, 3(3). Retrieved from <http://s3.amazonaws.com/publicationslist.org/data/melslater/ref-201/a%20note%20on%20presence%20terminology.pdf>

12. Rockstar North, Scotland/USA, 2008.

13. Rockstar North, Scotland/USA, 2001.

14. Johnson, M. & Lakoff, G. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press.

15. Re-Logic, USA/UK, 2011.

saga usually tries to transmit is physical, connected to the avatar, who represents an immersion center able to disturb other perspectives.

Again, there is a strong diorama map in order to control all the information about missions and places (etc.), whose importance is growing.

- *Shogun 2: Total War*¹⁶: in this case the game presents two linked dimensions. From its predecessors, the 3D battles remains an evident innovation in the genre. It is a sort of making concrete (and spectacular) the turn-based managerial session (depending on a bird eye perspective on regions), in which I have to expand my empire. The interesting point is that here the Diorama is essential and can be chosen as fundamental dimension to play (I can shift battles and solve them in an automatic way). Sometimes 2D and 3D coexist and their importance is in part a decision of the player.

16. The Creative Assembly, UK, 2002.