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Re-framing video games in the light of cinema

In its fourth issue G|A|M|E interrogates the complex relations between video games and cinema, revising and reflecting on a topic controversially debated over the past ten years. The relationship between these two media is layered and they are interconnected not only through their textual fabric (sharing and influencing each other in form and contents), but also in their practices and the theories that accompany them. More than fifteen years ago, in a seminal piece published on *Film Quarterly*, Mark J. P. Wolf pointed at the relationship between cinema and video games beyond 'characters and plotlines' (1997, p. 11), including aesthetics, visual codes, iconographies, practices, social spaces. The connection between video games and cinema (and, more broadly, the tradition of audiovisual media) is conceptually reflected by the compound noun that gives the name to the medium[1], but the two also show similar production models, sharing professional figures and displaying familiar consumption behaviours. The study of the relation between cinema and video games is connected to the development of game studies as a field and has become part of the debate on the status of video games as an object of academic study, focusing on the definition of methodologies and theories associated with it. In fact, during the past two decades cinema became a privileged means to access video games in popular discourses. Scholars and researchers in games studies developed a strong awareness of the problems intrinsic to this comparative approach, leading to its problematisation within academic contexts. Torn between the need to develop an independent field of studies and the interdisciplinary vocation of the discipline, game studies developed a suspicion towards this relationship, often debated at the margins of one or the other field. The complexity of this debate is dictated both by the nature of the video game as a layered medium (intersecting discourses on technology, cultural studies, aesthetics etc.) that eludes closed definitions[2] but also by the process of negotiation between the fields involved. Most notably, the argument took the form of an opposition between traditional fields of knowledge and the definition of a new area of investigation capable of developing an autochthonous discipline dedicated to the new medium. Among the contributor to this debate, Espen Aarseth (2004) stressed the necessity to develop independent tools

1. Mark Wolf points at the implications of the two possible variations of the name: "video game" and "videogame". The first one reflecting the ludic tradition of the medium and resembling other typologies of games such as board games and card games, while the second one foregrounds the audiovisual nature of its support, recalling artefacts such as videotapes and videodiscs (Wolf, 2008, p. 3).

2. Among others, James Newman points at the difficulty to provide a univocal definition of video games due to their 'instability and mutability' (Newman, 2013, p. 1).

of study apt to address specific characteristics that risked to be underplayed in the adaptation of pre-existing theoretical models directly applied from other established fields, calling for an understanding of video games in the respect of their primary ludic function. In particular, the opposition between the ludic character of video games and their narrative aspiration (Murray, 1997) generated a debate that was fundamental to the definition of game studies as a field and its object of investigation. Whether this conflict ever took place or not (Frasca, 2003)[3], its perception somehow had an impact on the development of the field and on its disposition towards certain approaches. On the other hand, the resistance generated within the declaration of independence of game studies only paired with the difficulty of film scholars to engage with the new medium, due both to the lack of suitable theoretical and analytical tools and to the scepticism towards its artistic potential. This situation resulted in the dismissal of video games from the tradition of studies on the moving image. Nevertheless, authors such as David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000), Lev Manovich (2001) pointed at the possibility of framing these media within a wider audiovisual tradition, tracing connections across their contents, structures and modalities capable of surpassing compartmentalised medium specific positions.

On a first level, game studies call for an updated reflection on what Wolf and Perron (2009, p. 10) call (referencing Francesco Casetti's work on film theory) the methodological theory. After half a century, film studies developed a constellation of theories that cover the ontological and phenomenological nature of the medium, its practices, its representative strategies, its history and historiographical value, and the politics connected to it, finally leading to question its methodological premises. Can the cinematic theoretical corpus offer a contribution to the development of game studies? If so, what are the possible intersections between these fields? What more can we learn about video games through the lens of film studies?

On a second level, we want to investigate the characteristics of these two media, their similarities and differences in terms of aesthetics, practices and production. The majority of the studies on this topic assume the narrative quality of the cinematic medium, focusing on the continuity between these media in terms of genres, tropes and iconography. This assumption is debatable and in need of renegotiation. If, on the one hand, it is true that the cinematic character of video games is often reflected by its narrative and spectacular bias, on the other hand it is possible to rethink the interplay between these two media in different ways. For example, by positioning video games within the larger history of spectacular media and attractions to which also cinema belongs. It is then possible to frame this medium within the tradition that connects shadow play theatre to the magic lantern and, subsequently, to early cinema and devices for amplified vision (widescreen, stereoscopy).

Since its birth the video game medium established a strong bond with its cinematic counterpart, defining itself in relation and often against it. Cine-

3. In an effort to put order to this debate Gonzalo Frasca points at the false nature of this opposition that wad somehow generated in its commentators rather than by the authors allegedly involved in its construction (Frasca, 2003).

ma has often been used to reach a wider audience, especially with the advent of home consoles, to market video games outside the niche of the arcades and capitalise on the popular culture dominating the majority of households, the one of cinema. For this reason as early as in the 1980s video games such as *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (Atari, 1982), capitalised on the fame of their cinematic counterparts to attract new audiences. This strategy allowed video games to exceed their technical limits connecting to wider narrative universes. While today discussions relating to IPs and the spreading of their content across different platform, format and different media underline the ever expanding transmedia storytelling strategies, as in the seminal case study of *The Matrix* saga (Jenkins, 2006), video games always relied on paratexts (manuals, adverts etc.) and, in a wider sense, on other source material to expand their communicative potential. Nowadays, its is not only common for video game franchises to share contents with films and other audiovisual products –franchises such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord Of The Rings* witnessed endless iteration of adaptations, spin-offs and expansions to their universes – but narrative ecosystems became so vast to make it difficult the identification of textual relationships. What is the primary text to *Disney Infinity* (Heavy Iron Studios, 2013)? Nevertheless the relationship and reciprocal influence between cinema and video games goes well beyond storylines and characters. Instead it is primarily at the level of the interface that cinema's influence becomes manifest in video games. Conception of space, in commercial products, is mostly tied to the idea of a camera recording the reality before it. The presence of a camera –a virtual one rather than a physical– in video games points at the relevance of understanding this phenomenon "in the light of" cinema, its history and its theories. In fact, not only are game artefacts to be looked at –we look at them while playing, but they also exist in a plethora of other spectatorial practices such as walkthrough on YouTube and live streams on Twitch– but their audiovisual codes become part of their ludic structure. Despite the unfulfilled promise of the interactive movie, titles such as *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010), and more recently the b-movie inspired *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015) experiment with alternative ways of control that combine interactivity and non-linearity with a cinematic drive and direction. Furthermore, the cinematic is to be found in a much wider variety of products and genre. A game such as *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2013), for example, is extremely cinematic not only due to its dramatic storyline, genre tropes and iconography, but also because it requires the player to develop a nuanced understanding of framing and editing techniques. In fact, players are required not only to switch to different perspectives according to the situation and to individual preferences, but also to alternate between multiple view-point in order to frame the action in functional and/or interesting ways, occasionally in order to record the session and upload spectacular fragments of gameplay. Moreover, the rise of the indie market and the proliferation of tools and commercialised engines allowed the emergence of experimental works that challenge the mainstream identification

with narrative models, opening new horizons of research. Titles such as *Garry's Mod* (Facepunch Studios, 2004) provide points of intersection with avant–gardes, problematizing the acquired definition of the medium, its strategies and internal structure. The 2000s witnessed an increased attention towards this topic also in academic environments. Scholars such as Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2002 and 2006), Alexander Galloway (2006) and Michael Nitsche (2008), furthered the studies on this subject exploring the ways in which video games intersect cinema in form, contents, and theories.

Finally, with its fourth issue G|A|M|E intends to discuss the place of video games in cinema. Cinematic incarnations have often been overlooked, mostly referenced with regards to their aesthetic and iconographic influence. Nevertheless, more than thirty years after the release of *Tron* (Steve Liesberger, 1982), video games still influence cinema on iconographic, thematic and linguistic levels. What role do video games play at the cinema? Are video games contributing to the development of a new cinematic aesthetics? Is this process connected to the commercialisation of new technologies? What are the reasons behind unsuccessful cinematic adaptations of video games? Video games provide source material for TV shows and web series, becoming protagonists of transmedial serialisation. At the same time, they are made cinematic subject of both apocalyptic and nostalgic discourses. Film studies have tentatively addressed the influence of video games on cinema accounting for the ways in which film texts and viewing practices have been affected by the emergence of video games and other interactive digital media. Since the appearance of *WarGames* (John Badham) on the big screen in 1983, cinema constantly reflected on its neighbouring medium, often depicted as a threatening object associated with the dangers of the digital frontier. Accounts of video games in films are generally articulated in three typologies: films that use video games as a trope; films that are influenced by video games in their structure and/or aesthetics; films that are adaptation of original video game materials. To the first category belong films such as *The Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, 1992) and *Existenz* (David Cronenberg, 1999). From *The Matrix* (Andy and Lana Wachowski, 1999) to *Gamer* (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2009), video games and digital media (especially VR technologies that, similarly to video games, project the user within a digital space) are depicted as dangerous tools, cause of personal and social disruption, responsible for the progressive alienation and dehumanization of society. These apocalyptic accounts of video games on the big screen only point at the strong relationship between the two and at the need for mutual acknowledgement and reflection. To the second typology belong films such as *Run Lola Run*(Tom Twyker, 1998) and *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003) that reflect on the ludic medium on a formal ad structural level. Among others, scholars such as Warren Buckland (2009, 2014) and David Bordwell (2006) pointed at the increasing complexity of movie storylines in relation to both new media and new technologies. Audience's media literacy and their familiarity with digital environments and video games

encouraged the experimentation with traditional narrative structure. Moreover, the development of digital supports and the commercialisation of these technologies on a large scale, allowed new practices and forms of fruition. DVDs first and digital content now, bring repetition and fragmentation to the film experience, allowing the viewers to catch up with increasingly complex narrations. The aesthetic influence of video games on films surpasses the complication of their plots, becoming manifest in their aesthetic, formal devices and audiovisual strategies that develop accordingly. While the role and impact of digital technologies in the development and multiplication of dynamic view-point that characterise the sensuous experience of contemporary "camera-less" cinema is widely acknowledged, video games often inform the understanding of time and space in cinema offering new and not-so-new modes of visions. If it is true that the emergence of the point-of-view shot in films largely precedes their dialogue with the digital media, its use represented mostly a form of experimentation usually associated with the altered states of either the subject or the object of the shot (Galloway, 2006, p. 39; Brooker, 2009), on the other hand, recent productions show wider and more diverse use of this technique, often used to evoke a kinaesthetic pleasure and embodiment typical of video games and in interaction with digital environments. From *Kick Ass* (Matthew Vaughn, 2010) to the *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012) and *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013), films increasingly try to achieve and offer a closer view-point (often a POV shot) to the characters trying to convey presence and sensorial experience. Following an initial stage of distrust and competition, films such as *Wreck it Ralph* (Richi Moore, 2012) and *Pixels*(Chris Columbus, 2015) nowadays turn video games into objects of nostalgia, becoming part of in the collective memory of the new generations, digested through postmodern referential texts, and consequently accepted within larger popular culture.

    With an essay titled *Video Games, Cinema, Bazin, and the Myth of Simulated Live Experience* Mark Wolf opens this issue of G|A|M|E highlighting the importance and relevance of film theory in relation to video games. In fact, taking inspiration from one of Bazin's seminal essays, Wolf criticises the rhetoric that promotes the irreconcilability between film and video game theory, stating instead the continuity that can be potentially unlocked within Bazin's original vision of cinema and its ideology. Through the analysis of the myth of total cinema, the author points at the ideas and ambitions that inspired the development of the cinematic apparatus –above all the one of the total reproduction of reality, to the point of transcending reality itself and capturing its essence– and pointing at similar ideas within the rhetoric of simulation at the core of the medium specificity. In this work, "The Myth of Total Cinema" is expanded reaching for an experience that includes the representation of reality and surpasses it via its simulation. In doing so, the author reframes the realist ideology of cinema within an experience that not only includes it but even exceeds it, reaching a higher ontological dimension already hinted at in the work of Bazin.

The contribution of Dominic Arsenault e Bernard Perron provocatively questions the opportunity and the necessity of using cinema and film studies as a framework to understand video games. According to the authors, this approach has been extensively influencing the study of this medium. The starting point is the concept of cultural series developed by Andrè Gaudreault e Philippe Marion. Arsenault and Perron state that the cultural series of cinema has been dominant in the interpretation of video games, forcing its acknowledgement as a medium only in relation to the film medium, preventing the potential for more relevant models, such as the one of animation. The identity of the video games as medium is tied to its name (video game) that constrains its interpretation to the cultural series of cinema. The use of video game as a label to address genres such as text-based adventure games, games based on abstract representations –which are possibly better related to technical and architectural drawing– is not a neutral act. Arsenault and Perron emphasise once more the dangers of using cinema as a model in the understanding of video games, stressing the need to explore alternatives to a cinema-centric approach.

The essay by Enrico Gandolfi and Roberto Semprebene, aims at studying the relation between cinema and video games proposing a new methodology. Taking inspiration from media sociology, the authors identify five categories and elements that can be found in films based on or inspired by video games texts: the production, the agential dimension, the representational dimension, the economic and cultural impact of the video game/movie. In addition, looking at films that establish a crossmedial relationship with video games, they point at the configuration of recurring categories such as the narrative, the aesthetic, the encyclopaedian and the dynamic. Finally, the authors analyse these categories within a series of case studies. These categories and their overlaps determine the identity of each cinematic adaptation in relation to the original video game texts. More in general, the model could offer some insight on the sustainability of crossmedial adaptation also beyond these two media. Semprebene and Gandolfi use three case studies to test their model, selecting works distant in time from each other, in order to proof how the relationship between the two media is inflected in different ways.

Sarah Atkinson and Helen Kennedy shift the focus from game to gameness and from cinema as a medium to its manifestations within social reality. The object of this investigation is the London-based experience of Secret Cinema that stages a collective performance. Viewers book a movie event for which they are provided a secret location on the Internet and through social media, where the film is projected within an environment that somehow replicates the one of the movie. While the opening recalls an alternate reality game, the final act instead recalls theme parks and a multimedia performance. The audience is given a film-themed dress code and once at the venue, they can either watch the movie or engage in other unrelated activities, many of which have commercial purposes. According to the authors, the ludic context is not only

evoked by the deployment of gamification strategies and by placing spectatorship whithin a more physically engaging framework, but it is mostly reflected by the ways in which video game related competences are mobilised taking part to a hybrid production between game, theatre, cinema and performance. Lluís Anyó's article, *Narrative Time in Video Games and Films: From Loop to Travel in Time*, maps a series of connections between the use of narrative time in cinema and in video games. Adopting Genette's narratological theories as a starting point for his exploration, Anyó highlights both congruences and distinctions in the analysis of chronology in the two media. The focal point of the research is, as expected, the relevance of player agency in the context of both the representation and the experience of narrative temporality. While cinema, both in the era of classical Hollywood and throughout modernity, has often employed devices such as prolepsis and analepsis, games seem to strive towards a paradoxical linearisation of time. More specifically, in multiplayer games, Anyó argues, the necessity for players to negotiate time intersubjectively allows for a minor degree of design freedom. Finally Anyó proposes an analysis of one of video games' most recurrent features, that of the loop. Revisiting the same game sequence several times, in order to overcome an obstacle or obtain a better performance, is a recurrent experience in gameplay, but as a transmedia form, that encompasses video games, cinema and digital media, loop seems to characterize many facets of contemporary media production and consumption.

In Bad Objects 2.0: Games and Gamers Steve Anderson analyses the representation of video games at the cinema through a diachronic perspective that reflects on the evolution of the socio-cultural relations between the two media. In addition to the thorough historical path offered by the author, the value of this contribution extends on a methodological level thanks to its original format. The piece is a hypertextual project designed on Scalar in order to inform the reading with a large array of clips providing examples to the points made by the author and allowing the essay to directly quote the referenced films. In this sense, the essay does not only reflect on the history of videoludic representations but also on the methodologies associate with these investigations. Anderson's piece in fact, is an example of new formats that are rapidly being adopted in academic contexts —such as hypertexts and video essay— that use multimedia formats to bridge the semiotic gap between the critical work (the essay) and its object (audiovisual media). Anderson's piece allows the reader to unfold a historical organised in decades (1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s) each associated with dominant themes and ideologies that are exemplified via clips available on Scalar. For this reason, the journal directly hosts an introduction to this work that maps it with links redirecting to the Scalar project.

In his article Alex Casper Cline examines three ways in which traditional audiovisual media have represented video games and the social, economic and cultural discourses surrounding them. Cline focuses on what he dubs as the (re)production of the 1980s UK game industry, a productive milieu that is at the same

time described and constructed ex-post by a series of films and TV series. *Micro Men* (Saul Metzstein, 2009) frames the rise of the British video game industry as dominated by the attrition between creative genius and a reactionary approach to media and technologies. The crowdfunded documentary *From Bedrooms to Billions* (Anthony and Nicola Caulfield, 2014) embraces a more optimistic view, often bordering overenthusiastic technophilia and, Cline argues, constructs a discourse that is largely devoid of a critical focus. Finally, the experimental documentary *Spectrum Diamond: The Myth and Legend of Matthew Smith* (Lucio Apolito, Paolo Caredda, Alessandro Diacco, 2002) constructs a quasi-fantastic narrative around the production of the games *Manic Miner* (Matthew Smith, 1983) and *Jet Set Willy* (Matthew Smith, 1984), blending gaming nostalgia, archival research and pseudo-history in the attempt to re-construct an esoteric segment of the history of video game production in the UK. Cline's article resonates with Anderson's Scalar project, in its attempt to shift the focus from the analysis of semiotic traits common to both media to the research around the discourses on video games and those produced by cinema and television.

Over the past ten yeas, cinema and video games have clearly developed a relationship that is as prolific in their practices and production as it is complex and problematic in its theorisation. With its fourth issue G|A|M|E asks, once more, what is cinematic in video games and what is ludic in cinema.

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