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RE-FRAMING VIDEO GAMES IN THE LIGHT OF CINEMA

Edited by Riccardo Fassone, Federico Giordano, Ivan Girina

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RE-FRAMING VIDEO GAMES IN THE LIGHT OF CINEMA

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CRITICAL NOTES

Book Review by
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L. Argenton, S. Tiberti, *Psicologia del videogioco*

Come i mondi virtuali influenzano mente e comportamento

IDENTITÀ, IMMERSIVITÀ, PATOLOGIA E TECNOLOGIA POSITIVA: OLTRE I LUOGHI COMUNI SUI VIDEOGIOCO

Stefano Triberti e Luca Argenton, entrambi dottorandi di ricerca, l'uno presso l'Università Cattolica, l'altro presso l'Università Bicocca di Milano, hanno dato alle stampe, per le edizioni Apogeo, un testo dedicato ad una branca peculiare dello studio dei videogiochi. Il titolo è semplice e immediato: *Psicologia del videogioco. Come i mondi virtuali influenzano mente e comportamento.* Nel leggerlo un videogiocatore esperto potrebbe nutrire qualche perplessità. Se ne potrebbe derivare l'impressione dell'ennesimo testo, come spesso accade per produzioni provenienti da ambito pedagogico-psicologico, poco avvezzo con il medium, che riproduce esclusivamente dibattiti giornalistici sensazionalistici, dando loro una patina di scientificità. Il sottinteso di questi testi, spesso, è una condanna *tout court* del mezzo videoludico, con annessi moralismi del caso.

Quanto appena descritto è l'esatto opposto dell'operazione effettuata dai due psicologi di scuola milanese. Già dall'introduzione il lettore-videogiocatore viene rassicurato dal programma dei due studiosi, e soprattutto dal loro percorso privato. I due autori in questione si dichiarano dei giocatori e mostrano di volersi allontanare dai luoghi comuni che si addensano nelle pubblicazioni videoludiche di approccio psicologico. Il programma, al termine della lettura, si può dire essere stato pienamente rispettato. Il lettore-videogiocatore si trova davanti ad un testo che si muove con sicurezza fra i riferimenti videoludici e prova a riassumere la letteratura scientifica di settore senza infingimenti su possibili effetti negativi o inutili panegirici del mezzo, né tantomeno prese di posizioni ideologiche preconcette contro il videogame in sé.

Più nello specifico il lavoro dei due studiosi affronta quattro ampie variabili, a ciascuna delle quali è dedicato un capitolo del libro: identità, immersività, emozione e cognizione, psicopatologia.

Nel capitolo dedicato all'identità i due studiosi affrontano il tema della possibile costruzione dell'io suscitata dai prodotti interattivi digitali. I videogiochi favoriscono la costruzione di un'identità proiettiva, il modo per osservarla meg-

lio è soffermarsi sulla dimensione dell' "avatar". Il soggetto, di fronte al proprio avatar, può sviluppare con esso differenti relazioni. Un avatar può essere di tipo meramente relazionale, ovvero sostanzialmente identificativo e stabile (come quello che si attiva attraverso l'immagine che appare ad individuare il parlante in una chat), o coprire una funzione agentiva, intessendo una rete di relazioni emotive e comunicative con il soggetto umano che lo interpreta (è il caso della maggior parte dei videogiochi). Gli avatar, poi possono essere a bassa personalità, risultando una pura estensione del videogiocatore, o ad alta personalità, divenendo dei veri e propri alter ego del videogiocatore (per esempio Duke Nukem). In seguito i due studiosi connettono questa teoria dell'avatar a una mappatura delle posizioni rispetto all'identità sociale e personale e al sé reale ed ideale, e si pongono il problema della specificità identitaria del gioco online e delle comunità che si formano attorno ad esso.

Il capitolo che affronta il tema dell'immersività si concentra inizialmente sull'effetto Proteus – attraverso il quale il videogiocatore tende ad assumere, anche nella vita reale, alcune caratteristiche del proprio avatar – e sul "senso di presenza", connesso alla percezione del sé e dell'altro in un ambiente virtuale. La parte più interessante del capitolo si occupa del concetto di "flow", ossia dell'assorbimento totale che si ha nel giocare a determinati prodotti, al punto da trascurare il fatto di essere in un contesto virtuale, avvertendo vere emozioni e coinvolgimento. Il testo sviluppa un interessante percorso che illustra come possano modularsi skills, obiettivi e richieste del videogioco, dimostrando come l'effetto di flow possa essere programmato in fase di game design e che esso derivi da determinazioni psicologiche, legate al modo in cui il gioco è costruito. Se ne deduce la conclusione che giochi "poveri" risultino, talvolta, maggiormente coinvolgenti di prodotti che hanno alla base ingenti investimenti, proprio perché sono maggiormente efficaci nel produrre il "flow". In conclusione di capitolo Triberti e Argenton ci segnalano sia possibile anche un effetto di "networked flow" (flow di gruppo, condiviso), in determinati ambienti, come quelli dei MMORPG.

Il capitolo dedicato a emozione e cognizione è il più complesso. Considerato il notevole sforzo di sintesi degli autori di studi su svariate variabili del tema posto, la lettura è meno agevole e il materiale, forse, meno organico che nei precedenti capitoli, tuttavia, sebbene da esso non si possa derivare una tesi coerente, si possono trarre numerosi spunti di interesse su singole questioni. Se ne segnalano alcune a titolo esemplificativo: la funzione pedagogico-educativa del videogioco e la necessità di apprendere regole e ruoli per incrementare le capacità di apprendimento, il problem solving, e il controllo del comportamento; le possibilità di empowerment di alcune capacità cognitive grazie alle sollecitazioni provenienti dai giochi; lo specifico conseguimento di abilità in ambito della cosiddetta "solution finding" (in particolare all'interno di alcuni generi come le avventure grafiche); la possibilità di proporre approcci edonici ed eudamonici attraverso il videogioco, ovvero suscitare condizioni

di benessere, felicità e realizzazione personale; un apprendimento basato "sul fare", attraverso l'acquisizione delle regole di un gioco e della capacità di orientamento entro di esso. Nell'ultima sezione del capitolo i due ricercatori riassumono brevemente, appoggiandosi ad alcuni esempi concreti, il funzionamento e i benefici cognitivi e pedagogici desumibili dall'edutaiment, e in particolar modo dal serious gaming, nelle sue variegate sfaccettature (advergaming compreso).

Il capitolo finale, dedicato alla psicopatolgia del videogioco, è quello più sensibile a potenziali opposizioni da parte di lettori mossi da posizioni ideologiche differenti. Nel capitolo si tratta, naturalmente, dei temi più noti in quest'ambito: violenza nei videogiochi, dipendenza dai videogiochi, videogiochi come causa di patologie quali obesità, psicosi, disturbi dell'attenzione. L'approccio dei due studiosi è rigoroso, e, al contempo, flessibile. Argenton e Triberti riportano le maggiori esperienze di ricerca in campo, senza acquisire una posizione preventivamente favorevole all'uno o altro paradigma. Quello che concludono, sulla base dei dati acquisiti, è che esiste una possibile connessione fra comportamenti patologici e uso dei videogiochi, o dei media in generale, ma non esiste una causalità diretta fra la fruizione del medium e l'adozione di un comportamento distorto. La patologia psichiatrica ha sempre cause complesse e integrate (fattori ambientali, sociali e predisposizione personale sono le dimensioni preminenti in questi casi). In soggetti già predisposti alla psicosi, laddove l'uso dei videogiochi fosse una delle esperienza significative della vita dei soggetti a rischio, potrebbero favorire l'acutizzarsi delle patologie. Dunque il videogioco non è la causa di una patologia, ma, come ogni altra dimensione della vita umana, può contribuire alla sua composizione.

I singoli capitoli sono accompagnati da interviste finali ad alcuni studiosi particolarmente rilevanti per le questioni affrontate in ciascun ambito. Non sempre queste interviste sembrano essere ben integrate con i contenuti dei capitoli (talvolta sembrano davvero in opposizione), o particolarmente approfondite su un piano scientifico (sono ovviamente discorsive, com'è proprio del genere cui appartengono). Tuttavia le interviste hanno un effetto retorico, spezzando il *continuum* del discorso accademico, e alleggerendo la lettura attraverso un effetto di *variatio*. Fra i pochi appunti che possono essere mossi al testo, ben curato da un punto di vista editoriale per altri versi, vi è la non corrispondenza, talvolta, di nomi e date fra richiami bibliografici nel corpo del testo e riferimenti presenti in bibliografia. Si tratta, in realtà, di peccati veniali: la serietà e circospezione dell'ultimo capitolo, può essere uno dei modi in cui si può riassumere l'approccio dell'intero testo. I due studiosi provano ad effettuare una sintesi delle principali ricerche in campo nell'ambito della psicologia dei videogiochi, riducendola a poche linee essenziali, e offrendo un possibile quadro teorico. Si tratta di un primo tentativo, che può fungere da pietra miliare per i futuri studi possibili. Particolarmente apprezzabile è lo

stile piano, lineare, che rende il testo fruibile non solo dagli specialisti in ambito psicologico, ma lo rende particolarmente utile anche a studiosi di videogiochi, o semplici videogiocatori.

Book Review by
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Jenna Ng (ed.), *Understanding Machinima.*

Essay on Filmmaking Virtual Worlds

Understanding Machinima. Essays on Filmmaking in Virtual Worlds (Bloomsbury 2013, edited by Jenna Ng) is an intriguing incursion into the world of machinima from a Media Studies point-of-view, trying to address the topic beyond game's environment, in connection with the evolution of the contemporary mediascape.

Machinima is a recent technology/performance/art/tool etc[1] (conventionally born in 1996 with Quake demos)[2] commonly defined as any kind of video artifact produced through real-time gaming graphic engines: in-game recordings, sandbox modes, hacked version of game engines or game-like professional tools are all valid sources to create machinimas. It's been a decade since it has been bought to the academic attention and to an increasing popularity on web broadcasting (mainly thanks to the web-serieS *Red vs Blue*, to *South Park*'s episode *Make Love*, not *Warcraft* or to the political short *The French Democracy* by Alex Chan).

The collection is built around twelve chapters, split into two parts (respectively Thinking and Using machinima), bringing together contributions from researchers, gamers, directors, artists, curators and machinima makers; every chapter goes along with digital endnotes, that can be seen from the dedicated webpage thanks to QR codes included in every chapter.

This anthology aims to distinguish itself from recent academic researches, analysing mainly the nature of machinima in connection with the universe of cinema, gaming and animation in the eyes of a "convergent" mediascape (Jenkins 2006), regarding machinima as a native-digital medium involving crossbreeding with mediated realities (virtual, augmented, hybrid) and increasingly tied to artistic or political environment. The underlying belief is that, as Jenna Ng suggests, machinima «has become [so much, ndA] connected with many other tools and media forms so that it is now less a discrete, distinguishable media form than a fluid dialogue of and between media».

1. As stated by Henry Lowood http://idmaa.org/?post_type=journalarticle&p=586

2. *Diary of a Camper, the Rangers clan,* 1996, is considered the first example of machinima.

Understanding Machinima manages to keep together contributions with different theoretical perspectives and aims, and to gather them up in a heterogeneous yet dialogic frame. As a result, the reader will easily identify several recurring themes; this well-directed dialogue among the authors reveals the complexity of the analysed issues, making for a work that is much more than the sum of the parts.

The first topic is machinima's hybrid nature. Born from game tools, borrowing movie language and techniques, continuously compromising with gaming, film and fandom culture, easily mistaken for digital animation, still unknown outside the gamer's niche; machinima is certainly difficult to describe and categorise. Several essays try to analyse its affinities and differences with (and within) gaming and movie worlds, its bounds with fandom and remixing practices; should machinima be defined through distinction with other media, or be accepted as a full-hybrid media form?[3] Either way, machinima has become a privileged viewpoint to analyse contemporary mediascape and its evolution; an interesting debate emerges from the anthology about the possibility to fully understand it using previous generic critical categories like remediation, culture convergence or intertextuality[4], or (as Jenna Ng claims) if we should give up talking about a «flow of content in the sense of media convergence (Jenkins 2006) but [rather, ndA] a flow of media and mediation itself[5]»

The issue of machinimas' autonomy comes as a direct consequence of its hybrid nature: being built using pre-existing tools, looking at older and more influential media, yet modifying them, machinima can be considered at the same time a subversive practice (shifting from documentation of high performance play to expressive and performative goals unknown in the original game) or a marginal subject in the mediascape. Some contributions deal with this duality: should machinima be independent, creating its own language and stop mimicking movies and animation (as Peter Greenaway stated in his lectures about *Second Life*)[6], or should it accept its "minor" nature (in a deleuzian sense)[7] and carry on a guerrillesque subversion of major languages from within, an act of survivance as described by Gerald Vizenor?[8]Are these the only paths available for machinima?

It's not simply a matter of autonomy; at the heart there's the capacity of machinima to bring innovative contributions to the long-lasting aesthetic development as a full, native digital media, by creating a new visual language or re-shaping the old ones; and at the same time, its usefulness as a newborn practice and technology, its role of innovative digital tool. Currently it is on doubt if machinima is moving towards a continuation of cinematic language, or if it has already developed its own style; if it is pursuing a "gamish" aesthetic[9] or a more realistic one. Some claim that emancipation from cinema's "tiranny"[10] will lead to discover the potentiality of a new type of space[11] that could be experienced and shaped up to the physics, while others remember that machinima still need to obey to the laws and limits of the game engine itself. Moreover, limits and potentiality of game engines are tied with machinima's nature as a tool, operation or "craft"; as convincing as it may be Michael Nitsche's claim that

3. especially regarding second-generation machinimas, born from professional tools like *Moviestorm* or virtual persistent worlds like *Second life*.

4. Lisbeth Frolunde discuss about Bakhtin's intertextuality and text hybridity in chapter 5. "*Facing the audience. A dialogic perspective on the hybrid animated film*."

5. See Introduction.

6. See Chapter 6, "*Dangerous sim crossing. Framing the Second Life art machinima*".

7. As claimed in "*Machinima. Cinema as a minor or moultitudinous key?*", Chapter 1.

8. There's a curious similarity between machinima's minority and Native Americans' concept of survivance, defined in "*Call it a vision quest. Machinima in a First Nation context*", chapter 10.

9. As suggested by Sheldon Brown in "*Be(ing)dazzled. Machinima in virtual worlds"*, Chapter 3.

10. Peter Greenaway's interview with Jay Jay Jegathesan can be read http://uwainsl.blogspot.com/2011/05/peter-greenaway-interview-following.html .

11. As suggested in Chapter 2, "*Beyond bullet time. Media in the knowable space*".

machinima can be considered XXIst century puppetry[12], indeed an essential part of its creation deals at the same time with avatars and camera movement[13], being more some kind of "puppetry in a cinematic environment". Can really technology's evolution shape new possibilities for machinima, or is it a practice born out of its limits and short-lived?

Certainly, whether machinima's future will be movie-centered or game-dependant, looking at digital animation or at the art of puppetry, it seems that its evolution is getting it closer and closer to trends of digital audiovisual world: realism in animations and in body movements' capture, growing hybridization in the audiovisual message, demand for affordable and flexible professional tools; all suggesting that machinima's destiny is deeply tied with recent developments in digital audiovisual culture. Lastly, there's the recent growing popularity of machinima outside the gamers environment, towards the universe of Digital Arts and for Political Activism; hibridity is not limited to different formats and quality of visual messages, but also in machinima being a part in complex artistic and political performance (live-events); as any remix-remake practice, its full potential lies when the main engine is used to convey a meaning that refers or conflicts with its own source. It's the opposite of historical "archival machinima", created to document high-performance play of skillful gamers, actively contributing to the gamer's community; nevertheless machinima has proved to be a useful and flexible tool in videogame art[14] or in digital activism[15], being both a mediation form and the tool for gaming culture jamming.

Besides, acting and filmmaking in virtual world imply several new issues in game-related ethics; making a documentary by filming Second Life's avatars[16] can be done without anyone noticing; gamers playing in online matches could unwillingly find themselves within "game-interventions", being unable to avoid or ignore culture-jamming actions made during the match. They become performers in a double sense, being players and active-spectators of these "digital happenings"[As claimed in Chapter 8, "Playing politics".]. Certainly, as we experience the rise of persistent world in online games, we believe there will be an increasing need of machinima as a "capture-based technique" for documentation of digital worlds. The ever-growing popularity of massive multiplayer games and the importance of documenting virtual environment could similarly lead to new pedagogical practices: Barwell and Moore[17] attested that teaching students how to create a machinima let them learn-by-doing new media literacies far beyond simple tasks involved in everyday computer use; machinima as a new digital craft (as claimed by Barret and Ng)[18] could be a useful training ground for digital literacies, requiring competences in audiovideo editing software as well as living and operating in virtual worlds.

In conclusion, *Understanding Machinima* is a well-written and captivating book, especially for those who want to analyse machinima in connection to

12. For Nietsche, Mazalek and Clifton, «machinima is a form of digital puppetry in which the virtual characters in a real-time game engine are used to perform an event and often to tell a story.»

13. Among others, the above-mentioned *Diary of a Camper* and the majority of first-person machinimas.

14. Cory Archangel's or Eddo Stern's works, described in Chapter 7, "*The art of games*".

15. See chapter 8, "*Playing politics, Machinima as live performance and document*".

16. See Chapter 9 "*Virtual lens of exposure. Aesthetic, theory and ethics of documentary filmmaking in Second life*.

the universe of media. It's reasonably not a book for beginners, but it needs to be considered mainly as a starting point for further and more in-depth contribuitions: recognising machinima as a digital medium, studying its bonds with the worlds of digital animation, game art, cinema, political activism and pedagogical goals, will eventually help us understand several core issues of the contemporary mediascape.

17. Authors of "*World of Chaucer. Adaptation, pedagogy and interdisciplinarity*", Chapter 11.

18. Chapter 12, "*A pedagogy of craft. Teaching culture analysis with Machinima*".

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It wasn't even acceptable in the Eighties:
Hotline Miami and snuff films

ABSTRACT
Hotline Miami is a game of massacre whose aesthetics are borrowed from an idealized version of snuff films. Along with their bloodyness, it remediates their supposed means of production: a poor quality videocassette that is viewed on an old cathode ray tube television. Artifacts of these technologies contemporary to the game setting (the eighties) are hypermediated and used as a narrative device (rewind, white noise…). Along with the use of retro pixelated graphics, it creates a sense of uneasiness within the euphoria of the frantic die & retry gameplay.

KEYWORDS: *Hotline Miami; Snuff films; Glitch art; Horror; Remediation.*

ARTICLE

Admittedly there are quite a few video games that meet the violent stereotype associated with the medium. Most of them are about guns and military power, but always rely on a strong moral about killing the bad guys and being a hero to the homeland. Others embody the full list of stigmas that are still sometimes associated with video game enthusiasts and can be summarized in one accusation: "You are a violent psychopath (and also do drugs)". This is exactly what *Hotline Miami* (2012) is about. *HLM* is a game of massacre created by Jonathan "Cactus" Söderström and Dennis Wedin under the name of Dennaton Games. This top-down shooter puts the player in control of an unnamed protagonist wearing an animal mask and asked to "clean up" some places of their natural fauna of angry mobsters. Unfortunately, he usually leaves the place pretty messed up, with blood and guts splattered from floor to ceiling. HLM is all about over the top action and gore. The first is borrowed from eighties action movies and Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive* (2011), which the authors admit to be fond of (Edge Staff 2012, p. 2). Bloodiness on the other hand is reminiscent of another genre that has an even more controversial reputation than video games: snuff films.

Named after the verb "to snuff", meaning to put out a candle, their content mostly refers to its slang usage: to kill someone. Right between pornography

and horror, snuff movies are "clandestine short films, shot for rich and perverted amateurs, in which the actress is actually tortured and killed (usually a woman, sometimes a teenager)" (Campion-Vincent & Renard 2002, p. 12). According to journalist Sarah Finger's extensive inquiry, their existence have yet to be proven, which makes them relevant not to film but to urban legend studies. People talk about in fear of an identifiable stereotype that has never been seen, except in works of fiction based on these rumors (*ibid*. p. 14). The stories are indeed dreadful: although not always about sex; snuff enthusiasts take pleasure in physical abuse, having an erotic and sadistic gaze toward torture and murder scenes (*ibid*. p. 12).

Born in the early seventies (Lapierre 2013, p. 12), "works of fiction exploiting the snuff movie theme are multiplying" a decade later (Campion-Vincent & Renard 2002, p. 14). *HLM*'s events take place in 1989, when this urban legend reaches mass media and settles in the collective imagination as a stereotype. Gore is not the only part of this game that makes it consistent with this setting. *HLM*'s aesthetics are based on technological artifacts borrowed from contemporary eighties technology, namely the VCR/VHS combo and early video games. It makes use of both remediation (transposing a media form into another) and hypermediation (highlighting the media's specifications), two concepts described by Bolter and Grusin (2000). *HLM* borrows and reshapes the videotape as well as visual elements exclusive to old arcade and home video games. Although being the work of Wedin, the game's art is consistent with Cactus' style that "ricochets between primitive (he favors the chunky, barely expressive pixels of the Atari 2600) and gratuitously stylized" (Mastapra 2012). *HLM* is an archaic looking piece of software, lo-fi and ridden with technical imperfections.

Thus, playing *HLM* sometimes feels like watching a videocassette. The screen flickers with snow when Richard, a cock-headed man, asks: "Do you like hurting other people?" Merely hidden behind a curtain of downwards moving horizontal lines, signature of the good old cathode ray tube, is none other than a snuff movie VHS built on a stereotype encountered in Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. In 1983, the snuff film rumor is "adapted to the contemporary media landscape" (Lapierre 2013, p. 72): it is not on film but on tape, leaving the big screen for the television and swapping cigarette burns for an image "riddled with interferences" (*ibid*. p. 97). *HLM* remediates the technical imperfections and poor cinematography of these bootlegs filmed by murderers who "just happen to have a camera in hand" (*ibid*. p. 96). When it follows the player-character, *HLM*'s view angle slowly tilts from left to right, copying a crude hand-held unsteady shot highlighted by a hypermedia lo-fi artifact: the retro pixelated graphics lean into chunky aliased lines that emphasize the image's imbalance. The amateur and minimalist stereotype is further reinforced with remediation of snuff movies overall shortness and the lack of editing (Campion-Vincent & Renard 2002, p. 13) into video game's brief levels that have to be executed in one single long take.

However in *HLM*, it takes several tries to successfully slaughter all of the antagonists. They are in fact pretty aggressive, which leads to multiple deaths

of the player-character who is immediately prompted to press "R TO RESTART!". It is an integration in the gameplay itself of the quicksave/quickload feature, the "F5/F9" described by Triclot as inherently videoludic (2011, p. 22). By restarting over and over, the player can experience "the pleasure […] of replaying a sequence until it gives satisfaction" (ibid. p. 21). *HLM* goes even further than snuff movies in which "the height of assassination is to film the murder, to repeat it endlessly while watching the film" (Campion-Vincent & Renard 2002, p. 22) by acting the killing again and again, swapping one euphoric repetition for another. The "R" key acts both as a hypermediated "F9" quickload habit and as a remediated left-pointing rewind button. Superposing two kinds of media usage, it punctuates the play activity and also becomes a storytelling tool at the end of chapter 11, when pressing "R" to restart actually advances the story. Being mortally wounded and rewinding is part of the gameplay as well as of the scenario. *HLM* also remediates technical artifacts as a narrative device when, before the biker story begins, the screen freezes. Scarred with two horizontal noise lines, the image distorts to the sound of the VCR's motor unrolling magnetic tape as it shows dates passing in reverse chronological order. The technical code of the rewinding is used to signify a full-fledged analepsys in the world of continuous flashback that is *HLM*.

With each restart, the level is left clean, with no traces of the previous mass murder attempts. The player-character then goes on rampage all over again, leaving behind him rounded crimson puddles that have anything but the consistency of the poorly detailed surroundings. Blood appears as liquid and contrasts with the angular pixelated setting: it explodes with each hit and spills slowly like an analog stain in a digital world. It stands out within the stylized low definition art style that blurs all of the graphic and gore content in a screen-wide mosaic. This may look like a censorship, but it mostly creates a strong sense of suggestion. The player knows they crushed bones, they have seen all of the animation and clicked through every one of the three movements it takes to break a skull open with a baseball bat. All that is left is guessing, wondering the rest of the crime that is already shown with great detail in one long take. No ambiguity is left: the player has been there and has done that. It was normal. Life holds little value in *HLM*, except from the bright colorful score that pops up to confirm each kill. Even dying provokes a satisfactory feeling of restarting. This classic video game discourse provokes an uneasy feeling when put into snuff film context. *HLM* creates a ludic approach to the act of killing by building up tension through difficulty of a frantic die and retry gameplay. It creates a state of vertigo, or "pleasure within panic", a kind of play that Callois names ilinx and that, with the highscore motif, can be linked to (eighties) arcade (Triclot 2011, p. 51). Life and death are reduced to numbers evaluating grotesque murders committed to the beat of a mimetic fast paced bass filled musical soundscape.

And then, nothing. Corpses everywhere, ambient noise and the adrenaline rush aftermath. With this brutal change of pace, a threshold is crossed, leaving

some quiet time to the player to reflect on their actions. What is left of their torture and murder is only a bloodshed. For a moment, they were one of "the executioners, sadistic brutes, [that] would usually be men, their faces masked or not being identifiable on the screen" (Campion-Vincent & Renard 2002, p. 13). They were not merely watching but producing a snuff movie. They were the murderer, the shape-shifting beast with dozens of faces none of which are human. The animal masks worn by the player-character are those of another stereotype from the horror genre: monsters. In the videoludic space, Perron describe them as dangerous: both a physical threat with lethal power and a menace to identity and moral order (2005). They are the kind that like to hurt other people, like the player did while enjoying the game. They felt empathy not for the victim but for the monsters and, realizing this, would "want to disrupt the relationship with the monsters" (ibid.). Fear comes from identification to deviant behavior, to one of the most gruesome urban legend that blends horror and pornography into an euphoric and uneasy display of violated corpses.

Within a screen filled with artifacts of a magnetic tape worn though repetitive viewing, *Hotline Miami* is tinted with the murky aura of snuff films. Through ultraviolence and glitch art, it remediates this urban legend, making it fun in an uneasy way, making a horror monster out of the player. *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number*, which should be released soon, is likely to resume this reflexion in a storyline involving what seems to be a commercial nineties slasher movie named *Midnight Animal*. Starring the *Pig Butcher* playable character, it is hinted to reenact the events that happened in 1989, furthering remediation with a film within the game that trailers suggest to be filled with digital aliasing and analog interferences.

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Towards a typology of video game trailers

Between the ludic and the cinematic

This paper explores video game trailers, their various forms and the roles they play within video game industry and culture. It offers an overview of the current practice of video game trailer differentiation and proposes a new typology of video game trailers based on their relation to ludic and cinematic aspects of a video game, combining the theory of paratexts, video game performance framework, the interface effect concept, as well as the concept of transmedia storytelling. This typology reflects the historical evolution of a video game trailer and also takes into account current trends in the audiovisual paratexts of video games.

KEYWORDS: *Trailer, Video Game, Paratext*

INTRODUCTION: VIDEO GAME TRAILERS AS PARATEXTS

Trailers originated in the American movie industry in the 1920s (Kernan, 2004). Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, however, they were gradually adopted by other entertainment industries, like video games (Young, 2007), book publishing (Voigt, 2013) and performance arts (Preece, 2011). Originally, the main purpose of a trailer was to promote and advertise a movie. Their deployment was in line with Genette's (1997) sense of the paratext, functioning as a vestibule or shopping window for the main text. Over time, trailers have become more diverse and their functions and authorships differentiated. While the notion of trailers as paratexts is contested at the moment – some scholars uphold Genette's tradition (Gray, 2010; Kernan, 2004; Preece, 2011) while others criticize it for its vagueness (Johnston, 2011) – I will stick to the paratextual approach to trailers in this paper to better illustrate different relationships between the trailer and the main text, not just the promotional function. The validity of use of this literary theory concept also stems from its wide adoption by game studies scholars (see Consalvo, 2007; Galloway, 2012; Jara, 2013; Jones, 2008; Payne, 2012).

For the purpose of this paper, I will define the official video game trailer as any official audiovisual paratext that informs the viewer about the existence of a

particular video game. In the next two sections, I will first provide an overview of current practices in video game trailer categorization and then propose my own theory-driven typology.

THE TYPOLOGY OVERLOADED: FROM PLAYER-FOCUSED ADVERTISEMENTS TO MULTIPLICITY

According to Young (2007), early video game advertising was preoccupied with explaining how hardware works and how it transforms passive entertainment into a more active mode of engagement. After this initiation period, "the actual purpose of the advertising has changed from one of teaching users how to use the system to publicizing specific games in a manner very similar to film trailers." (Young, 2007, p. 235) If we were to look for the first trailer in the history of the video game industry, the *Zaxxon* (Sega, 1982) televised ad from 1982 is the likeliest candidate. While the thirty second spot still focuses on the hardware aspect of the arcade machine, the voiceover also describes the specificities of the game and the experience it can provide. In the 1990s, video game trailers became a standard marketing tool. The increasing popularity of this type of promotional content was confirmed by the founding of the website *GameTrailers.com* in 2002. The site was acquired three years later by MTV Networks. Trailers also play a significant role at video gaming exhibitions such as the *Electronic Entertainment Expo* which dates back to 1995.

Over time, trailers have diversified, partly due to the development cycles of big budget video games. Carlson (2009) lists some basic types of trailers, but the practice is much more complicated. Publishers use different adjectives to differentiate between specific forms of trailers released for a given game. There is, however, no common approach. Before moving on to a more theory-driven typology, I would like to describe some of the criteria used in PR discourse to distinguish between various official video game trailers. Bear in mind that this categorization is not meant to be exhaustive. Its primary aim is to illustrate the current practice of categorizing trailers without a fixed or shared typology.

1. Content
   As Carlson (2009) points out, the first and most obvious criterion is the nature of content (or footage) used in the trailer. We can, for example, differentiate between gameplay footage, pre-rendered CGI animation and live action footage.
2. Date
   The second criterion, also noted by Carlson (2009), is the release date of the trailer in relation to the development cycle of a given game. From this perspective, we can talk about teaser, reveal, announcement and launch trailers.
3. Venue
   The third criterion is the original venue of a trailer release. While trailers are predominantly watched online (Johnston, 2008), the

location of their initial unveiling is occasionally used to differentiate between trailers for one game. Significant examples include *E3, Gamescom or Tokyo Game Show* trailers.

4. Focus
   The fourth criterion is the particular focus of a trailer. While some trailers may strive to represent the whole package of a game, others pinpoint individual features. Such focus can range from story to gameplay, highlighting combat, single-player or multiplayer campaigns.
   It is important to note that the above-mentioned criteria are used very freely by publishers, journalists and audiences. Publishers tend to use just use one criterion to describe a trailer, even though it is often possible to apply all four criteria. The trailer types assigned using these four criteria are overlapping as they are in no way mutually exclusive.

THE TYPOLOGY SYNTHESIZED: PARATEXTUALITY BETWEEN THE CINEMATIC AND THE LUDIC

While it is possible to use the aforementioned criteria to construct a typology of video game trailers, the outcome would be very descriptive and overly focused on the formal qualities of a trailer. I can, instead, propose a typology based on the relationship between the video game and its paratext, taking into account the conceptualization of a video game as an interplay between rules and fiction (Juul, 2005). This approach will allow us to look at how these two sides of a nonlinear text are represented in mostly linear trailer paratexts.

As a paratextual genre with origins in the movie industry, a video game trailer comes with an inherited cinematic quality. This cinematic aspect in its linear nature is well suited to the representation of a video game's fictional world and, especially, its narrative. At the same time, the ludic elements that constitute the cybertext nature of a video game (Aarseth, 1997) should also be represented in any trailer whose intent is to provide a holistic impression of the game. But there are limitations to the ways in which a trailer, a linear paratext, can represent a video game, a nonlinear text.

I will begin my typology in the realm of video game advertising, which focuses on players and their interaction with the hardware. This focus reappears periodically whenever new gaming hardware is introduced to the market. That said, such focus is not restricted to the promotion of hardware; it can be present in the promotion of particular video games, as seen, for example, in the genre of rhythm games. Still, this player interaction is staged for the purpose of a video game trailer. Using the perspective of performance framework (Fernández-Vara, 2009), we can establish a category of performance trailers that show us staged gameplay either from the perspective of a spectator looking upon players interacting with the game, or from the perspective of a spectator looking at the game screen itself. These two spectator positions are often combined within

trailers to give credibility to the representation. Performance trailers generally focus on the ludic aspects, showing the viewer a possible gameplay experience in very linear fashion.

We can think of nearly every video game trailer as a case of cross-promotion or transmedia (Jenkins, 2006). Video games and video game trailers are, after all, different media channels. This practice of "exploiting forms of promotion as content, and indeed vice versa […]" (Freeman, 2014, p. 2372) dates back to the early 1900s. In this sense, I talk about transmedia trailers as expanding the fictional world of a video game beyond the boundaries of a video game as a medium. Content-wise, they can consist of a substantial amount of footage – live-action or CGI – specially created for the trailer. Transmedia trailers can be used as a tool of transmedia storytelling and they tend to represent the fictional world of a video game in a linear, cinematic manner.

The last type of video game trailer deals with the inherent interactivity of a video game. Some publishers seem aware of the limitations attendant to representing a nonlinear text through the use of a linear paratext and try to overcome them by creating so-called interactive trailers that enable limited viewer agency by, for example, allowing a choice between pre-recorded stealth or combat gameplay. These trailers strive to recreate the interactivity of a video game by replicating the interface of a video game, effectively establishing two layers of paratextuality. Applying Galloway's notion of interface effect (Galloway, 2012), interface trailers make the non-diegetic (or paratextual) layer of a video game tangible by mimicking it. Interface trailers, themselves a paratext, employ the notion of interface to represent the ludic aspects of a video game and to convey its non-linearity.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I quickly covered the theoretical approaches to the genre of video game trailers and created an overview of formal criteria used by publishers to differentiate between video game trailers. I also proposed a typology rooted in the theoretical concepts of performance framework, transmedia and interface effect, consisting of three categories based on the relationship between the paratext, the video game and its ludic and cinematic aspects: performance trailers, transmedia trailers and interface trailers. This typology aims to organize academic discourse on video game trailers and to act as a starting point for further research in production, content and audience reception of video game trailers.

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Lego
When video games bridge between play and cinema

This paper proposes an exploration of the Lego Transmedia World. The starting point is a definition of a Lego aesthetics based on four characteristics: modularity, translatability, intertextuality and a tripartite nature of Lego minifigures. A brief analysis of the most popular types of Lego products – toys, games, video games and movies – will delineate a continuum that goes from different degrees of playfulness to mere readership: continuum in which videogames hold a special position. The final aim of this article is to underline, thanks to the Lego case study, the complexity and variety of the knotty intertextual nets that characterize transmedia realities.

KEY WORDS: *Lego aesthetics, toy, cinema, videogames.*

INTRODUCTION

Playful phenomena are often exploited as source of inspiration by film-makers. Toys, after videogames, are the most fruitfully exploited playful phenomenon, featuring both films about generic toys (as Pixar's *Toy Story*) and inspired by real products – as *Barbie*, *G.I. Joe* and *Transformers*. However the only toy-inspired film that had a genuine success, appreciated both by audience and critics, is the Lego movie.

The path of Lego from toy to cinema features many steps, among which the creation of many video games. This article aims at investigating the role and position that Lego video games hold in the definition of a Lego aesthetics and in its application to different media.

1. LEGO AESTHETICS

The transmedia phenomenon that we refer to with the world "Lego", is complex indeed. It has been analyzed both as a language [1] and as a parallel, alternative world [2]. Undoubtedly Lego aesthetics are very well defined in the collective imagination. We will try, here, to describe it focusing on four main characteristics.

– Modularity
First of all, Lego are bricks, construction sets: Lego are meant to build things. This fundamental characteristic goes through all kind of Lego products: objects (and also people) can be reduced to unbreakable pieces ans used to build other things.
– Full translatability
Objects and people from the Lego world, are alternative to their real-world counterparts. Lego minifigures have their own characteristics: yellow skin, cylindrical heads, few facial traits, polygonal bodies, painted clothes, and limited possibilities of movement. This features can be summarized as a system of differences from humans: applying this system to an existing or fictional human being, allows to translate him or her into the Lego world. The same happens with objects that can be adapted to a set of standardized characteristics (connectivity, standard sizes, reduced range of colors) and become Lego. Lego aesthetics, therefore, are fully applicable to any existing creature or object, making our world fully translatable into the Lego world.
– Characters, roles and actors
In his article "Dolls in the system of culture" Jurij Lotman describes the difference between statues and toys as a matter of details: statues have many details in order to convey the artist's message, toys, instead, have less details and let the player's imagination free to complete them.
Lego minifigures can be divided in three groups according to their amount of details:
– Actors: minifigures (the older ones) with almost no detail: they represent simply a human being and they can play every role;
– Role-based minifigures, which display a certain amount of details to indicate their thematic role [3] (medieval warriors, football players, policemen and so on).
– Characters, both from Lego and licensed fictional worlds, the detail and characteristics of these minifigures portray, without any doubt, the identity of one single person, with all his isotopies, background narrations and abilities.
Lego modularity, of course, complicates further the situation: body parts and accessories can be mixed in order to create endless new minifigures.
– Intertexuality
In 1999, in the occasion of the release of *Star Wars Episode I: A Phantom Menace*, *The Lego Company*, for the first time, produced licensed theme based construction sets; since then, Lego exploited many other licensed franchises: *Indiana Jones, Pirate of the Caribbeans, The Lord of The Rings, Minecraft, Batman, The Simpsons,* just to mention a few. Every narration is susceptible to be translated into Lego, and the characteristics of the Lego aesthetics make this translation, not only possible, but suitable, allowing the audience to become playful and to re-enact, to question and to parody the original narration – enjoying the freedom typical of a toy-based playfulness.

2. THE LEGO TRANSMEDIA WORLD

Lego-related products are endless, counting unofficial fan-made creations and works of art [4]. Here we will list only few of them, reconstructing the path between brick and cinema.

Toys

The construction sets are the first and most important of all Lego creations. Caillois [5] would classify them as *paidia,* being a free form of play, with very few and neglectable rules.

The difference between the three types of minifigures (characters, roles and actors), related to the evolution of Lego sets through time, is present to its full extent only in toys, and gives rise to different degrees of freedom in play. The increased amount of details, in fact, appeals to the player's desire of mimicry [6], but at the same time becomes a constriction, directing the course of play. Therefore, the less detailed are the toys, the more freedom has the player; the more detailed are the toys, the more mimicry is involved. Moving in the range between toys and statues, means moving between creation and representation, between authorship and readership.

Lego Games

The Lego Group produces a wide range of games that exploit the Lego aesthetic in a more regulated form of play – what Caillois calls *ludus*. The Lego Games line consists in 24 boardgames, both based on Lego themes (e.g. *Ramses* and *Ninjago series*) and on licensed themes (*Harry Potter*). The modular nature of Lego aesthetics featured in Lego Games is very productive: boards and dices can be redesigned and their compatibility with Lego toys makes them susceptible to be adapted and modified in order to evolve the game play.
Lego games feature, like most boardgames, a regulated form of play, in which the narration is extremely simple and mostly out of players' control. The latter, however, thanks to the customization possibilities granted by Lego aesthetics, has an unusual mastery on the game's rules.

Videogames

Since 1997 The Lego Group, in collaboration with many different developers, has published more than 50 videogames, half of which based on licensed themes. With the possible exception of Lego Creator, all the Lego videogames are forms of ludus: strictly regulated games. The Lego aesthetics has been applied to very different kinds of videogames, as racing games (*Lego Racers*), simulation strategy games (*Legoland*), real time strategy games (*Lego Battle*) and even a MMORPG (*Lego Universe*). Most of Lego videogames and, in particular, almost all the theme-based videogames (*Ninjago, Bionicle, Legends of Chima*, etc.) are action-adventure games.

Lego's modularity holds a central position in the working of these videogames: both for customization and as primary feature. However, differently from toys and games, Lego videogames are most of the times characterized by complex narrations. This is not surprising for action-adventure games, but even the racing or strategic games often have very well constructed backgrounds, interesting plots and enjoyable campaigns.

The Lego Movie

The Lego Movie is a very smart display of meta-Lego thinking. On one side, it explicitly puts the Lego aesthetics in the foreground of the plot: the modular nature of Lego is both opposed by the villain, and praised by the good; intertextuality is stronger than ever (many characters of the film coming from licensed themes); and different kinds of minifigures (role-based and characters) represent different ways to approach Lego building (following the instructions vs free construction).

On the other side, the film give prominence also to the Lego mythology: Benny, a broken blue astronaut from the 80s, represents the bond of affection that players develop with their oldest toys; "relics" (non-Lego objects as coins, rubber bands and similar) parody the disorder that is usually found in every kid's "Lego box"; and the ending, with the threatening "little sister", capable of destroying the Lego world, reflects a real-life problem of many young Lego players.

Finally it is important to mention that the Lego Movie has been conceived as part of a transmedia playful narration: both construction sets and a videogame have been launched simultaneously with the film. The latter, therefore, is not considered as the end of a process of evolution, but as a new center of innovation in a knotty intertextual and transmedia net.

3. BRIDGING BETWEEN TOYS AND CINEMA.

The different Lego products listed above, define a range between playership and readership, according to the amount of details which are present in characters and to the presence of predetermined narrations. Starting from the most free form of *play, paidia*, we said that toys with more details, create a more effective mimicry, but at the same time restrict the players' freedom. Games, thanks to their rules, trace a feeble line of narration that players must follow. Story-telling becomes more important and complex in videogames and a real plot finally appears. Finally, with films, the audience no longer participate to the narration, but reaches a degree of mere readership.

Videogames hold a special position in this chain of translations, because, for the first time, they apply Lego aesthetics to a fully constructed narration. Thus they are of central importance in the definition and the translation of Lego aesthetics itself, from toy to film. In addition, Lego videogames are the first Lego product made without. . . Lego. Lego bricks were the raison d'être of all the other Lego products, fan-made tributes (as stop motion brickfilms) and works of art. Vide-

ogames substitute Lego bricks with a digital version, similar, but different. *The Lego Movie* is based exactly on this digital version of Lego bricks.
Alas it's not possible, here, to investigate more deeply videogames' role in this transmedia translation. Nevertheless, this few pages are meant as a reflection on the importance of considering the relationship between cinema and videogames as being part of a wider chain of transmedia translations, that pervades all forms of play and of storytelling. Lego, thanks to their wide range of products, is a particularly good case study, but it is no exception. Many transmedia narrations involve toys, boardgames and action figures, that should be taken more seriously into consideration, if we wish to shed some light on the complex relationships between playfulness and story-telling.

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