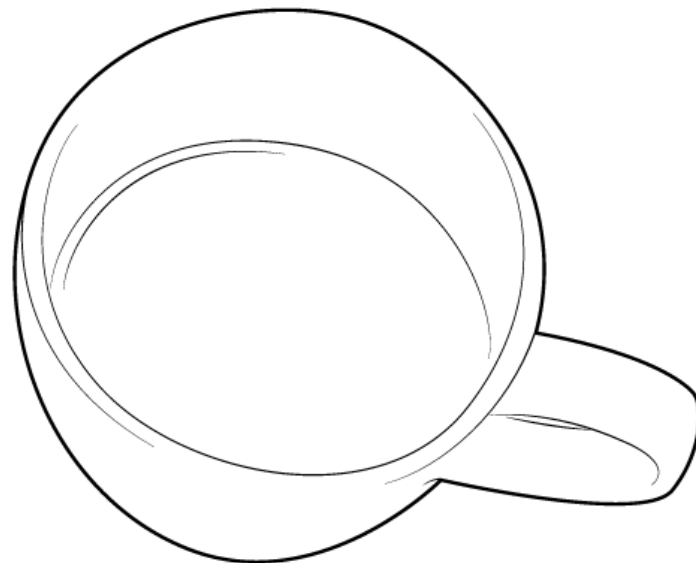
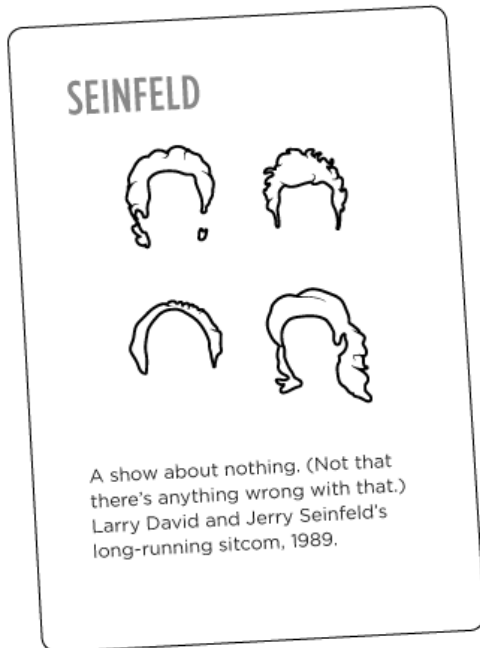
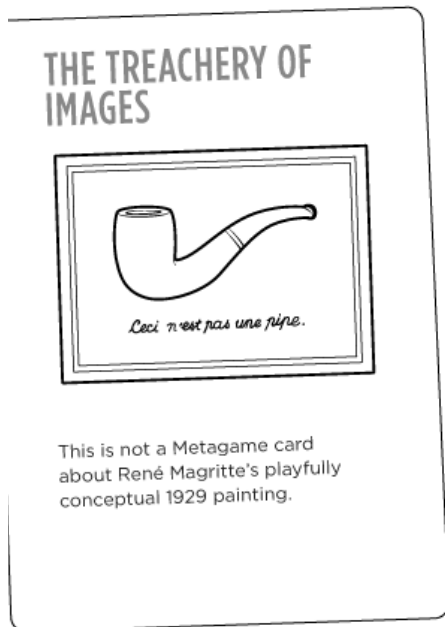


GAMES ON GAMES

Game Design as Critical Reflexive Practice

Edited by Giovanni Caruso, Riccardo Fassone, Gabriele Ferri, Stefano Gualeni, Mauro Salvador





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P. Harrigan, M. G. Kirschenbaum (eds)

Zones of Control. Perspectives on Wargaming [The Mitt Press, 2016].

A wargame is a game that “realistically” simulates a military conflict of any size and length, from a one afternoon skirmish between infantry platoons in an area of a few square miles to a global war lasting several years such as the First or Second World War. The majority of wargames simulate real conflicts, from Alexander the Great’s campaigns to the present war in Afghanistan, but some of them depict “future” wars, such as the games imagining a clash between NATO and the Warsaw Pact that were quite popular in the seventies and eighties (after the fall of the Berlin Wall these games became largely outmoded). A wargame can even simulate a conflict with no specific time and space context, like *Tactics II* (1958), one of the very first recreational wargames ever released, which depicts the struggle between two non-historical twenty century-style armies called Red and Blue. As I said, in order to label a game as a wargame, what counts is realism, the fact that the game portrays war in a detailed and plausible way – different kinds of units (infantry, artillery, tanks, paratroopers, partisans, etc.) with different capabilities, moving on a map with a specific geography (mountains, woods, swamps, rivers) that has an impact both on movement and fighting. *Games such as Risk* (1959), *Diplomacy* (1959), or *Stratego* (1961), albeit they played a role in the birth of the wargame industry, are not considered wargames because their simulation of war is too abstract, too chess-like. The majority of wargames have a mapboard where units – counters of different colors representing the opposing armies – move on a hexagon grid (*Tactics II* had a mapboard divided into squares, like a chessboard; the very first commercial game featuring an hexagon map was *Gettysburg*, 1961). In many wargames, units – or at least some of them – exert a so-called *Zone of Control* (ZOC) on the six hexagons surrounding the hexagon the unit is occupying. For example, units must stop when entering an enemy’s ZOC. Or, ZOCs cut enemy supply lines. So, for the title of their huge collection of essays (the volume counts 806 pages), editors Pat Harrigan and Matthew G. Kirschenbaum chose an actual key concept in wargaming, something that is at the very core of

this ludic universe. But at the same time, a title such as *Zones of Control* evokes the image of moving boundaries, of contesting domains. And this is precisely what this huge book deals with.

Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming – clearly bound for becoming an indispensable reference book in the field – is divided into nine sections, each one addressing a specific topic. The authors are both game designers and scholars from a variety of academic fields, ranging from military history to visual culture. Every section has an opening essay which broadly addresses the issue, followed by shorter essays focusing on specific questions. Inevitably, the first section of the book is devoted to history – where and when wargame was born and how it evolved. The following eight sections address various topics, from game design to wargame as an academic instrument, to wargames in literature. So, reading (or skipping through) the book, we move from essays on the problem of space scale and map design to an essay on Roberto Bolaño’s posthumous novel *The Third Reich*, inspired by one of the most successful wargames ever published, *Rise and Decline of the Third Reich* (1974); this chapter is written by the very designer of the game, John Prados. As I said, the various sections address different questions but they are not insulated from one another. Going from one section to the other, we find a series of recurring dialectical tensions.

First of all, there is the opposition between recreational and “serious” wargames. The industry of commercial wargames was born, in the United States, between the late fifties and the early sixties, thanks to the initiative of *Avalon Hill*, a company based in Baltimore, which published all the above mentioned wargames and dominated the market till the nineties (the heyday of wargames was the seventies and eighties, and *Avalon Hill*’s main competitor was New York based SPI, which went bankrupt in 1982). But wargaming was born well before *Avalon Hill*’s *Tactics II* and *Gettysburg*. The idea of “realistically” simulating war on paper was developed by Prussian officers in the early nineteenth century. The so-called *Kriegsspiel* was not a recreational game, but a conceptual tool used by the Prussian – and then German – general staff to study past campaigns and prepare future ones. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Armies and Navies around the world have used wargames to train their officers and devise their plans. Also some think tanks used – and still use – wargames to study military and political conflicts. RAND Corporation, an American think tank connected to the US armed forces, played a key role in planning the Vietnam war, and many of its suggestions were inspired by its wargames, which probably used an hexagon grid before *Avalon Hill*’s games. Considering the disastrous outcome of the Vietnam war for the United States, this is not exactly a plea for wargaming for military planning.

Another dichotomy that runs through the entire book is that between analog and digital wargames, in dialog with the dialectics between recreational and “serious” wargames, because the military immediately started to use computers for its simulations. The decline of popularity of wargames in the eighties

and more acutely in the nineties is largely linked to the competition with other kinds of games. The first strong competitor, fantasy role-playing, was a spin-off of wargaming itself. The very first role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), was the evolution of a Medieval miniature wargame rulebook, *Chainmail* (1971), which included rules about sorcery and magic.¹ While becoming more and more accurate in their simulation of war, wargames became less and less playable. *Rise and Decline of the Third Reich* is a wonderful game, but its rules are complicated. Mastering them is like passing an exam at Law School. And it is time-consuming: to play the entire war, you need a couple of days. The game includes shorter scenarios, but playing the entire conflict, from the invasion of Poland to the battle of Berlin, is much more fascinating. In my teens and early twenties I was an avid wargamer, but I had to stop playing when I got to the university. As a Ph.D. student forced to publish or perish, I could not afford to “waste” so much time (after a twenty year pause, being an associate professor with quite a long bibliography, I am happily going back to the hobby – once a wargamer always a wargamer). It is self evident that role-playing, which is relatively “light” as rules are concerned, as well as video games posed a serious threat to wargames. If this hobby is still alive it is largely thanks to card-driven wargames, introduced in the mid nineties. The first card-driven wargame is generally considered to be *We the People*, designed by Mark Herman and published by Avalon Hill in 1994, exactly when I was dropping out of wargaming. From this point of view, this book, which as a whole I consider really excellent, was slightly disappointing to me, because of the lack of a chapter specifically devoted to the relationship between “traditional” and card-driven wargames. As I said, I am a “re-born wargamer”, and I am trying to catch up with this thrilling novelty of card-driven wargame, that for most people may not be a novelty at all. In card-driven wargames, players can move their units and fight according to the cards they have. The cards – visually and conceptually similar to those used in card games like *Magic: The Gathering* (1993) – have absorbed part of the rules. Card-driven wargames’ rulebooks are usually shorter than those of “traditional” wargames. These games are not just less complex (even though mastering the cards is still a difficult task), but they are also less time-consuming. It is no accident that one of the most popular of card-driven wargames, *Twilight Struggle* (2005) – more correctly, a war and political game –, allows players to play the entire Cold War, from 1945 to 1989, in just three hours.

But beside the recent fortune of card-driven wargames, it is self evident that in the digital age, board wargames represent a tiny niche. War simulation immediately moved to video games. First person shooter games have been clearly inspired by tactical wargames, such as SPI’s *Sniper!* (1973) or Avalon Hill’s *Squad Leader* (1977). At the same time, board wargames were literally translated onto computer screens, with hexagons and counters. So, the question is, did computers change the design and play mechanisms of wargames? One of

1. Miniature wargaming was born in late-Victorian England and is sort of a cousin of board wargaming. *Zones of Control* includes several references and a couple of chapters strictly devoted to miniature wargames.

the most interesting essays of the book, tellingly titled *The Unfulfilled Promise of Digital Wargames*, by Greg Costikyan, is adamant in claiming they did not. According to Costikyan, who started as a board game designer at SPI and then switched to computer games, digital wargames were in the position of solving some of the main problems of analog wargames. For example, one of the great flaws of wargames as “realistic simulations” is the players’ omniscience. Sitting before the map, the player has a precise knowledge of enemy forces’ location and strength. It is something that no general ever experienced on the battlefield, not even in the age of aerial reconnaissance and satellites. It is what military scholars call “the fog of war”. There have been attempts to simulate the fog of war on mapboards. In the so-called block wargame, units are not cardboard two-dimensional counters but cubes, where the information – unit’s size and strength – are on the face hidden to the other player (it is a concept clearly derived from *Stratego*), so you can spot the enemy unit on the map, but you can’t say if it is a battalion of untrained conscripts or a division of experienced and well armed professional soldiers. But of course computers could simulate the fog of war in much more complex and efficient ways. And we can say the same thing about other key elements of wargames, such as space and movement on the map. According to Costikyan software houses refused to even address these problems. They did not want to invest in novel game styles, and were satisfied with cartoonish FPS games and real-time strategy games, much less sophisticated and realistic than analog wargames.

Another question that systematically surfaces in the different sections of the book is that of the “political” – in the broader meaning of the word – connotation of wargaming. In the introduction, the editors openly address the problem: “Much can and should be written on race and nationality in wargaming, but the weight of the hobby’s Anglo-American heritage has so far greatly limited this” (p. XXIII). The editors do not mention it, but it is self evident that a third key concept is at stake here: gender. Wargaming used to be, and still largely is, a predominantly male hobby, both as players and designers are concerned. Even sci-fi novelist and utopian socialist Herbert George Wells, who was a strong supporter of women’s suffrage, in his *Little Wars* (1913), one of the very first rulebooks for a miniature wargame ever published, is quite suspicious toward women players. In the opening page, Wells writes that the game he devised is meant for “boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girls who like boys’ games and books”. For today’s standard, this is a very politically incorrect sentence. Moreover, as we have seen, wargaming has always been strongly connected to the military establishment. So, wargames are an activity targeted mainly at white men, some of them in uniform. From this perspective, there is some kind of a political problem with this hobby, unless you belong to the Illinois Nazi Party, or at least voted for Donald Trump.

One of the explicit goals of *Zones of Control* is going beyond wargaming as a white men's club. And the goal has been achieved. Some of the most complex and stimulating essays of the collection were written by people who do not belong to the club, such as Japanese game designer Tetsuya Nakamura and transgender game designer Rachel/Bowen Simmons. But still, the problem is there. No matter how many essays we can read and write on gender and wargame, or on un-militaristic, pacifist, "philosophical" games, such as the wargame designed by Guy Debord, on which *Zones of Control* offers a very articulated essay that elegantly mixes Marxism with Clausewitz's thinking², wargame remains an activity with "a dark side". Playing at war is like watching a war movie. Even in anti-war movies there are scenes that inevitably thrill the audience. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* is no doubt a film against the American intervention in Vietnam, but the helicopters' attack sequence, with Wagner's soundtrack, makes war look beautiful. It is the devil's beauty. But if war were not "beautiful", if it were not somehow fascinating, at least for some people, the history of the human race would have been very different. As I already said, in my teens I was an avid wargamer, but I was also a member of the youth organization of the Italian Communist Party, and I was fully aware of the contradiction between these two things. I rarely mentioned my hobby to my comrades. And at the same time, I never joined a wargame club, because those places were crowded with right-wingers. In *Little Wars*, Wells tries to soothe his socialist conscience claiming that his game can help people grasp the horrors of war. His message goes something like: "Do not make war but play it". It is more or less the same position expressed by Brian Train and Volko Ruhnke at the end of their essay *Chess, Go, and Vietnam: Gaming Modern Insurgency*. Train and Ruhnke are game designers specialized in counterinsurgency and asymmetric wars; conflicts where politics, economics and diplomacy are as much important as the fighting on the field. They are bright game designers and their essay is definitely very interesting, but when they bump into the "devil's beauty" question they cannot help playing the political correctness card. They resent the fact that wargames on World War II assemble "detailed and complete orders of battle for the Axis forces, including units of the Einsatzgruppen and lawless SS brigades and divisions" (page 515). First of all, at least to my knowledge, there is no game portraying the Einsatzgruppen, for the simple reason that these were not units meant for fighting on the frontlines. Their only goal was exterminating the Jewish population of the Soviet Union. As far as the SS brigades and divisions are concerned, Train and Ruhnke are referring to the Waffen-SS, i.e. the military branch of the SS. These were military units that fought alongside the regular German Army. Of course their behavior toward the Russian population and the Soviet prisoners was utterly brutal, but in that respect there was not much difference with the regular Army. Calling the SS "lawless" is ludicrous, because in the context of the Third Reich political and judicial system, the SS were the Law. Of course, the Third Reich was a rogue

2. I found Alexander R. Galloway's essay *Debord's Nostalgic Algorithm* really disturbing. In the opening page, he talks about the kidnapping and killing of Aldo Moro, the Italian prime minister assassinated by the Red Brigades in 1978. Galloway writes: "During that time (i.e. his detention), Moro appealed to the Christian Democrats to acquiesce and negotiate with what both the newspapers and government officials alike called terrorists" (page 371). I suppose that prof. Galloway just does not know what he is writing about. The Red Brigades kidnapped, wounded and killed dozens of people. They used intimidation and assassination as tools to achieve a political goal. This sort of tactics is universally called "terrorism".

state, but the problem is not just the SS organization per se, but the entire body of the totalitarian state. So, one either does not play wargames on World War II, which as historical simulations need the presence of the Waffen-SS units, or tries to cope with the devil's beauty. It might be argued that the vast majority of wargamers, even liberal wargamers such as myself, prefer playing the Nazis invading Russia than playing the United Nations trying to stop world hunger. It is exactly what Roberto Bolaño's novel is about. Some political correctness make-up will not solve this contradiction.

Book Review by
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A. Bossom, B. Dunning: *Video Games* *An Introduction to the Industry* [Bloomsbury]

Come recita il sito ufficiale dell'editore Bloomsbury, *Video Games. An Introduction to the Industry* è collocato all'interno della collana Creative Careers, una raccolta di strumenti finalizzati a collegare il periodo della teoria e della formazione alle prime esperienze lavorative nel variegato settore delle visual arts.

Questo compatto manuale introduttivo è diviso in sei capitoli ben distinti. Tre di questi trattano argomenti già abbondantemente approfonditi e discussi in numerosi testi recenti: la storia del videogioco e il suo rapporto con l'universo mediale e la società contemporanei. Nonostante questo, Bossom e Dunning li affrontano con grande attenzione al presente e con lo sguardo ben rivolto al futuro. Non è un caso che all'avvio del capitolo sulla storia del videogioco, gli autori provino a collegare meccaniche di gioco proprie di epoche passate (dal sumero *Gioco Reale di Ur*, risalente a non meno di un paio di millenni prima di Cristo, fino ai giochi da tavolo del secolo scorso) a meccaniche diffuse nei giochi digitali contemporanei, ipotizzando un'interessante continuità fra archetipi ludici nella Storia.

La rapidità della trattazione non lascia però il tempo agli autori di approfondire e, passando fra le altre cose attraverso una genealogia delle console, il concetto di esperienza narrativa e gli Esports, essi dedicano qualche riga a un altro fenomeno interessante: l'utilizzo delle tecnologie del videogioco come strumento di simulazione scientifica, dalla rappresentazione delle strutture molecolari alla visualizzazione degli effetti della teoria della relatività in un ambiente fantasy visualizzato in prima persona.

Altrettanto ben indirizzati in questi capitoli sono sia i discorsi sull'*urban gaming* e *l'augmented reality*, che allargano il fuoco della questione ludica oltre lo schermo dei dispositivi digitali verso contesti fisici reali e calpestabili; sia gli approfondimenti sui supposti effetti deleteri del medium, da indagare non tanto per le modalità con cui mette in scena la violenza ma piuttosto per la rappresentazione ripetuta e normalizzante di strutture sociali e politiche idealizzate e date per scontate.

I rimanenti tre capitoli del testo sembrano rispondere maggiormente agli obiettivi della collana, distinguendosi da altri testi introduttivi di taglio più teorico e analitico: qui sono trattate le figure professionali coinvolte nella produz-

ione videoludica, l'evoluzione tecnologica e il comparto economico aziendale del settore. Fondamentale il fatto che questi capitoli, come anche i precedenti in realtà, siano corredati da corpose interviste a professionisti, tra cui spiccano i nomi di Chris Brunning, technical manager di Crytek, Rob Small, CEO di Miniclip, Henrik Fahraeus, lead game designer di Paradox Interactive e Mike Bithell, game designer indipendente, in grado di dare opinioni e di delineare interessanti scenari dall'interno.

Da segnalare per esempio è l'approccio del capitolo sulla tecnologia in cui non si passano solo in rassegna i diversi hardware ma si accenna allo studio delle interfacce, ai motori grafici e alle loro possibilità e limitazioni, fino ad arrivare a qualche spunto di programmazione (l'OOP, *Object Oriented Programming*). Nel capitolo sugli aspetti economici e aziendali invece, molto puntuale è il breve approfondimento sui rischi di assuefazione e dipendenza legati ai sistemi di monetizzazione dei mobile game e dei social game e alle loro modalità promozionali verso i più giovani.

Più nel dettaglio, questo tipo di approccio ha anche lo scopo di comunicare al lettore una prima superficiale idea delle metodologie di lavoro della *game industry* odierna, con un focus specifico su *Scrum e Sprint*. Il primo metodo consiste in una serie di confronti programmati a cadenza regolare con l'intero team produttivo al fine di individuare obiettivi comuni e affrontare problematiche condivise, migliorando al contempo la comunicazione fra tutti i diversi professionisti coinvolti; il secondo metodo prevede invece di organizzare periodi di lavoro di media durata, misurati in settimane, in cui il team o una parte di esso lavora a un obiettivo preciso e tenta di portarlo a termine senza ingerenze esterne, nemmeno da parte dei produttori o dei committenti. È interessante notare però come queste metodologie, presentate come standard nel testo, rischiano di sollevare perplessità e scetticismo in chi è abituato a lavorare in modo diverso: in Italia per esempio, dove il settore, salvo rare eccezioni, è ancora più simile all'artigianato che all'industria. Oltre a questo, a emergere con forza dalle interviste è anche uno strano amore per gli straordinari e il *crunch time* (il periodo che precede la consegna del prodotto finito, in cui spesso si è costretti a lavorare "più di dodici ore al giorno, sei o sette giorni alla settimana"), che sembra essere da un lato una sorta di requisito minimo di disponibilità per lavorare nella *game industry*, ma che dall'altro rivela una profonda stortura nelle routine produttive anche delle aziende più strutturate e di successo in campo internazionale.

Tenuto conto di questa sommaria divisione in due macrosezioni, una più canonica e tradizionale, una più orinetata alla formazione e all'approfondimento delle professioni del settore, *Video Games. An Introduction to the Industry* non è certamente un testo per addetti ai lavori ma piuttosto un buon tentativo di unire considerazioni storiografiche e teorico analitiche sul videogioco con approfondimenti a tutto tondo sul comparto produttivo. Bossom e Dunning riescono nell'intento a metà, dando qualche *insight* interes-

sante e corredando il testo di *task* e *discussion points* per stimolare il lettore ad andare oltre, ma non riescono, per esigenze di formato, ad approfondire troppo la mole di argomenti trattati.

Book Review by
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F. Giordano, B. Perron (eds.): *The Archives*

*Post-Cinema and Video Game
between Memory and the Image
of the Present*
[Mimesis International]

The volume is the product of the studies presented during the Postcinema section of Gorizia Magis Annual Spring School, held during Udine Filmforum, but this is a case where the value of the contributions exceed the simple proceedings of a conference: the ambitious aim of this book is not only to investigate what is an archive in a time of transition from analog to digital media, but most of all to understand the relation between the notion of archive and contemporary items such as user generated contents, video games, digital art or webseries.

This kind of objects often resist any kind of preservation, or at least pose some relevant questions on the continuity between old and new media, the role of the users in the building of an archive, the concept of memory in the contemporary media landscape.

As Bruce Sterling states in the first essay of the collection, we walked through the looking glass that separates us from the previous order before media transition and nothing can ever be the same: even though this is a dark, resigned vision of our era in which we have to accept the instability of the archive and the impossibility to describe what's happening, it's true that the Internet has become a place of mutations that we can't control, where the new productive processes put an enormous amount of variable in the traditional productive system (the studio system vs. Augmented Reality, for example) that challenges every category we had.

Augmented reality, hybrid digital art (as in Spielmann's essay), mobile consumption practices (Odin), interactive documentaries (Odorico) are just a few examples of a new relationship between us and the media: art can involve humans within a new living archive; mobile phones force us to think of a democratized archive; the new non-fiction contents offer a new way of collecting and rewriting memory that includes user experiences, emotions and participation.

The "human factor" in the contemporary archive notion seem to be one of the main points of the volume, as clearly pointed out by Jean Chateauvert who

gives us an overview on a second level of archive: the reactions and comments to the episodes of a popular webseries like *The Guild*.

Observing the vast world of the social platform related to the series we can understand how social media enhance our experience as viewers: with different rules and targets for every different platform, from the series' official site's forum to Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook, users enjoy the experience of taking part on an archive of activities, being it related to fandom practices or simple comments on the episodes. These new forms of archive, or network of archives, are filtered only by sites and forum administrators, in a contract with users. These examples enlighten us on what has become of the potential of participatory culture, including human activities, albeit volatile, in what will be the future archives of our era.

The first part of the book concludes with an analysis of the preservation problems linked to the obsolescence of digital storage techniques, which leads to new strategies like emulation and to a constant monitoring of the archiving tools in a future constant flux (Alessandro Bordina), stressing once again the "living" feature of a new idea of archive; but it's in the second part of the collection that the focus moves from a general analysis of the audiovisual archive in the contemporary era to a specific focus on video game.

The result of this focus shows us how the video game universe can be a rich and useful resource to observe the actual form and practices of archiving.

We can enjoy different original and fruitful approaches to the issue, like a comparison between silent films and video games (Garin/Salvadò), where we see how the silent era shares with games a strong stress on visuality, playfulness and gags: their languages seem very close, so that we can talk about games as metaphorical archives of our medial past; another productive comparison is that between old book series and the serialization of video games on the Microsoft Xbox Live service (Fassone), which leads the author to talk about re-circulation and re-contextualization.

The contributions go further focusing also on the issue of practicing the video game, with the rhizomatic and "creative" expansion of the archive in a community of modders (Caruso), the instability and the potentially infinite paths offered by a game like *Neverwinter Nights* (Fornasiero), not to forget the question of the preservation of gameplay in contents like "Let's Play" or the "Playthrough", which represent, according to Dor and Perron, practices with specific archiving needs, linked to the experience of the gamer and difficult to preserve in cases where the game has no ending.

Is it possible, then, to talk about archivality in video games? Yes, if we accept an inevitable loss of the game identity, according to Federico Giordano's contribution: a game is a social object, and its identity is strongly intertwined with the gamer experience and its relation with an interface in a specific time and space. The need to transfer or emulate a game to preserve and archive it will necessarily mean the impossibility to spot an "original version" of the game

itself. The conclusion of the volume, with its last essay, presents not only a more volatile and fragmented idea of a videogame archive, but also a new idea of the archivist who will have to consider this kind of inevitable loss and imagine critical editions and new forms of preservation, being able to follow the “traces” left by the game and its users’ past experiences.

It’s fascinating to see how many of the contributions find inspiration in the history of media, like the magic lantern of Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, the early cinema archiving issue in FIAF activities, the relation between cinema of attractions and videogames, or between literary series and games: all these examples tell the story of a thread that bonds media through history, showing how we manage remediation processes and the complexity of the participatory variables that emerged in the last twenty years.

We have old tools to manage new objects, and we have to adapt them considering how the notion of archive, as shown by this book, has and will become increasingly volatile, living, changeable. This volume clearly points out that we, as users, are one of the more unpredictable variables in this new notion, with our experiences, with our contribution to media content with participation and creativity, with our choices when we operate in potentially endless worlds and stories in video games.

The modern archive is indeed an unstable one, so that we can talk about an anarchive, where traditional rules and criteria of preservation do not work anymore. We just have the duty to observe what is happening, trying to understand and accept the gigantic mutations we found through the looking glass and the inevitable losses that our era is imposing to the enormous amount of cultural products offered by the Internet, always aware that, as historians say – and Sterling quotes – “Much is gone and much remains”.

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