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Games on Games
Game Design as
Critical Reflexive Practice

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In September 2013, the editors of this issue of "GAME The Italian Journal of Game Studies" hosted a panel at the DiGRA conference in Atlanta, to explore video game design as a cultural praxis, as a mediator that allows specific forms of criticims and epistemological inquiry to emerge. The panel, titled $G|A|M|E$ *on games. The meta-panel*, aimed at constituting "a step towards a playable theory of game studies – a meta–level in which playing, designing and critiquing over–lap" (Caruso, Fassone, Ferri, Gualeni & Salvador, 2013), and addressed topics such as the history and theory of self–reflexive games, their presence in the mainstream market, and the implications of designing a game of this sort. In other words, the panel was a first attempt at imagining different forms of game research that would complement or, in some instances, even substitute the written word as the preferred tool for scientific dissemination in game studies as well as certain other context of philosophical inquiry where the experien–tial qualities of the medium and its interactive affordances constitute definite advantages over – and possibility to complement – text (think of the materiali–zation of ethical scenarios, thought experiments, of the possibilities to access experience of alternative phenomenologies, etc.).

In the last three years, the panelists produced a number of contributions on the subject of self-reflexive video games and playable theory (Fassone, 2015, Gualeni, 2015), tackling topics such as the meta-communicative potential of video games, medium-specific forms and modes of self-reflection, and video games as tools for theory, speculation, and philosophical thinking. This issue of "GAME The Italian Journal of Game Studies" is a provisional conclusion and a partial formalization of this wider – inherently open and rather informal – network of research interests.

In the years following the Atlanta panel, the number of video games that could be legitimately characterized as self-reflexive has grown exponentially, which led to an increased attention from the game studies community on the subject, with papers (Ensslin, 2013), panels (Backe, Fassone, Karhulati & Švelch, 2016), and – maybe most significantly – games being published and presented at major conferences. The interest in self-reflexive critical game design has progressed significantly. In 2013, we presented a series of independent games that showed a disposition towards self-reflexivity, and a game designed as a proof of concept of playable theory – Stefano Gualeni's *Necessary Evil*. Just three years later, the number and complexity of examples has grown beyond our expectations. On one hand, theoretically-inclined practitioners have designed and released games-on-games that confront, discuss, and critique different aspects of video game design, development, distribution and culture. On the other one, maybe more surprisingly, also mainstream games seem to consistently adopt meta-referential discursive strategies as a common component of their design lexicon. In the last decade, games like *Portal* (Valve, 2007) or *Eat Lead: The Return of Matt Hazard* (Vicious Cycle, 2009) represented the odd emergence of self-referentiality in a medium that seemed to prefer an often crude form of literality. However, more recent AAA games such as *Saints Row IV* (Volition, 2013) or *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013) have contributed to a popularization of self-reflexivity as a legitimate, and to an extent even desirable, mode of expression with their encased narratives, and their conscious effort to reveal some of the tropes and affectations of contemporary game design. Self-reflexivity, or the more prosaic use of self-aware humour, may have transpired in mainstream games through the mediation of successful experiments such as *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013), in a process that seems to resonate in other media contexts (Quigley, 2010).

Nevertheless, most of the main questions posed by the 2013 panel remained open. Can video game design be compared to more formalized practices of scientific research or speculation within game studies? And, by virtue of an intellectual leap that in itself calls for discussion, can video games be considered as an efficient vehicle for the presentation of certain kinds of knowledge, in the same way in which papers, conference presentations, and books are? What Ratto defines as "critical making" (2011), the practice of producing artifacts of different sorts in order to "supplement and extend critical reflection", may apply to

video games as well. Forms of "research through design" (Zimmerman, Forlizzi & Evenson, 2007), of "carpentry" (Bogost, 2012), and "speculative design" (Dunne & Raby, 2013) have been analyzed, discussed, and maybe most importantly, put into practice in different fields of cultural and scientific production. To address this gap and to map the current (and future) state of self-reflexive games, we asked both researchers and designers to imagine an application of these concepts to video games. Paraphrasing Zimmerman, Forlizzi and Evenson, what does research through game design might mean? What epistemological insights can we derive from the act of designing, making and playing video games?

This issue offers a variety of approaches to these very questions, explored by scholars/designers whose theoretical work significantly intertwines with the practice of game design. Moreover, this issue is in itself inevitably self-reflexive in at least two ways. First, with Games on Games. Game design as critical reflexive practice we consciously attempted at stretching the boundaries of the format of the scientific journal. For this reason, potential contributors were asked to submit not only papers, but also video games that complement theoretical and speculative thinking, prove a specific point, or offer means of playable critique. As we believe that games may in fact offer a viable lexicon for scientific production and that game studies as a field may benefit from some playful research, this issue is a first experiment with producing and disseminating knowledge stemming from research through game design. This inevitably led to a series of questions regarding the integration of text and games. Is a game design document supposed to integrate the meaning of a game on games? Or should the playable artifact stand on its own as a legitimate piece of scholarly work? In this issue we adopted a hybrid policy, with contributions ranging from the purely textual to more complex examples integrating gameplay and traditional written commentary.

Second, this issue adopts a self-reflexive perspective by publishing extracts from the peer-review process. When discussing the implications of publishing a wide and diverse range of materials (papers, games, design documents, etc.), we concluded that exposing parts of the process of peer-review of this multitude of objects may in fact reveal some of the dialogic nature of scientific publication. While, in most cases, scientific papers are published as relatively stable texts, existing for the audience only in their final format, the objects – both readable and playable – published in this issue are presented along with some of the reviewer's comments that were critical in shaping their final version. Revealing parts of the mechanism on which scientific journals are built – namely the submission-review-resubmission cycle – is our own contribution to the process of research through practice. This denouement frames the larger question of whether a playable critique may be assessed by means of traditional peer-review, and aims at revealing the kinds of insights authors derived from this inevitably asymmetrical dialogue. Furthermore, it is probably only fair that a journal that asks authors to produce self-reflexive artifacts, detailing and critiquing their own craft, takes a step itself towards the exposition of its inner workings.

Stefano Gualeni's contributions to this issue gravitates around the game *Necessary Evil*, which was already mentioned as the first experiment that was explicitly and didactically designed and developed with the intention to start a discussion on self-reflexive games that spanned practice and theory. His paper inaugurates our discussion on the possibilities for video games to be mediators that facilitate critical reflections on conventions and traditions in video game design and development. In other words, it introduces self-reflexive video games as video games designed to materialize critical and/or satirical perspectives on the ways in which video games themselves are designed, played, sold, manipulated, experienced, and understood as social objects. The textual academic work accompanying *Necessary Evil* comprises two interdependent sections: a reflection on the game (as well as the design decisions that participated to its realization), and a wider discussion on the virtual worlds of computer games and digital simulations as critical, epistemological tools, or – more in general – as the philosophical contexts where a new way of pursuing humanism is already arising.

Pippin Barr is present in this issue with two games and a paper detailing the design decisions that informed their production. Jostle Bastard and Jostle Parent are playable critiques of *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games, 2012) and *Octodad: Deadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014), two games that claim to present a critique of video game violence and a humorous take on parenting respectively. Through the use of a design practice described by DiSalvo as "reconfiguring the remainder" (2012, p. 63), Barr points at what is left out of these games, ultimately stating that both fail in their rhetorical intent. As noted by Barr in the commentary provided with the games, *Hotline Miami*'s critique of video game violence is contradicted by its very mechanics, that prescribe violence as the only possible player interaction with the environment. In *Octodad: Deadliest Catch*, on the other hand, the lack of permanent consequences prevents the development of a meaningful narrative in favor of a shallower sequence of comedic skits derived from the player's incompetence. Barr's games substitute or reframe a core mechanic of *Hotline Miami* and *Octodad: Deadliest Catch*, thus addressing what the author considers to be fallacies in their design, and offering a glimpse at alternative, speculative versions of the two games.

With *Nostalgia Videogames as Playable Game Criticism* Robin J.S. Sloan posits that not only games designed with precise critical intents may be dubbed as games-on-games, but rather that a critical intent towards other games or game culture in general may be found in most video games. Drawing from a series of theoretical traditions dealing with the concept of nostalgia and its manifestations in cultural production Sloan proposes three close readings. *Braid* (Hothead Games, 2008) is analyzed as a critique of canonical games such as *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985), that operates on preexisting player literacy regarding the mechanics and narrative implications of platforming games. *Homesickened* (Snapman, 2015) engages with discourses on gaming technologies by refashioning specific hardware-dependent aesthetic configurations

– for example the CGA colour palette – in the context of contemporary game production. Finally *Velocity 2X* (Futurlab, 2014) is presented as an example of pastiche, exploring the boundaries and intersections of different video game genres.

Brian Schrank's analog game *Bust A Cup* pits two players one against the other in what the author describes as "the LARP of a brawl". The players wield ad-hoc tools – a wooden structure, a hammer, a chain, and the eponymous cup – in the attempt to smash each other's cup. In his companion piece to the game, Schrank offers a theory of play within the frame of real-life risk, analyzing the social and ludic consequences of playing a game of *Bust A Cup*. Schrank claims that the controlled but unavoidable amount of risk implied by *Bust A Cup* – one can be hit by the hammer, or cut by the shards of an exploding cup – instead of promoting aggressive behaviors invites players to question their sense of the self, and rethink their attitude towards safety, control, and security. Schrank's piece, coupled with the videos of games of *Bust A Cup*, argues for a reconsideration of sanitized, allegedly risk-free play.

Daniel Cox and Matthew Beale's game *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* tackles the ethics of first-person shooters, by casting the player in the role of an NPC, a low-level grunt at the mercy of the overpowered protagonist. The game asks the player to fill a number of forms and overcome rather repetitive tests in order to assess her ability to sustain the amount of physical and psychological abuse required for the job. By trivializing violence in the context of a first-person shooter, *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* engages with the morality of violent play and the ethical inflexibility of algorithms. Moreover, the stark, aseptic look of the game operates as a reflection on the form of digital bureaucracy found in video games, "on how algorithms both operate from and perpetuate states of boredom".

Josef Florian Micallef's *Illusion Master* is a short game that tackles some significant issues in game studies, such as immersion, flow and self-reflexivity. Through the game and the accompanying piece, Micallef proposes to rediscuss the notion of immersion in favour of a more nuanced reading of the practice of gameplay as pecualy ambiguous. In Micallef's game the player is forced to enact a form of double embodiment, playing both as the avatar and, in the final stretch of *Illusion Master* as a self-conscious player reflecting on what Micallef describes as "objective self-presence". The text accompanying the game acts both as a theoretical reflection on phenomenological issues in game studies and as a design document detailing the conceptual and pragmatic implications of producing a philosophically informed game.

Evan Torner confronts the topic of self-reflexivity in tabletop role-playing games, thus providing an argument for the inclusion of analog play in the discussion on games-on-games. Torner analyzes three experimental role-playing games that present different but arguably convergent forms of self-reflexivity and self-referentiality. Epidiah Ravachol's *What Is a Role-Playing Game?* is a nano-sized role-playing games that abstracts the fundamental components of the genre into a minimalist set of rules and ask players to reflect on the nature of

role-playing. Meguey Baker's *1,001 Nights* is a playable critique of the encased narratives found in *Arabian Nights*; Nathan D. Paoletta's *World Wide Wrestling* is a role-playing take on the milieu of professional wrestling that asks players to conflate performance, storytelling, and kayfabe. Through the analysis of these examples, Torner claims that the free-form narrative structure and the fluid nature of social interaction found in tabletop role-playing may be conductive to self-reflective practices and forms of critical game design and play.

Finally, the cover image for this issue of GAME, found at the top of this page, was provided by Local No. 12, the designers of the card game *The Metagame*. Since *The Metagame* was inevitably referenced in every meeting the editors had when working on this issue, it seemed fitting to have it up there. We are grateful to John Sharp and Erik Zimmerman for their contribution.

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