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Make Better Criticism: A Mature Form of Cultural Analysis

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1.1 “MAKE BETTER GAMES”?

For many years, we’ve been invited to “make better games”. However, the Game Developers Conference’s mantra has the uncommon property of being simultaneously unquestionable and ambiguous. In fact, this Kantian imperative carries some weight only if you are able to define the meaning of “*better*” (we take for granted that we know what “games” are or, at least, we acknowledge their existence). The task of defining what “better” means is not futile. On the contrary, it’s of vital importance. Because if you cannot tell if, how, and why games matter today (read: if, how, and why games are good or bad), well, you lose.

In other words, we are stuck with the same old philosophical dilemma: “If a tree falls in the forest and there is nobody around does it make a sound? Does it even exist?” Which translates: if a game is “really good” but nobody is able to tell us *why* the game is “really good”, does the game even exist? And who is “us”? Hard core gamers? Casual players? The mainstream?

This issue has epistemological, ontological, and aesthetic implications. More pragmatically, it has remarkable commercial repercussions. After all, the main reason why we want to make better games is to sell them, right?

1.2 “MAKE BETTER CRITICISM”!

One of the major challenges we face today is improving our critical analysis: if games need to “evolve”, as the GDC 2004 motto goes, so does our criticism.

Now, what is criticism? According to Webster’s dictionary, ‘criticism’ is:

“A critical comment or judgment.”

- a. The practice of analyzing, classifying, interpreting, or evaluating literary or other artistic works.
- b. A critical article or essay; a critique.
- c. The investigation of the origin and history of literary documents; textual criticism.

Let's recap: to make better games, we need to define the meaning of "better". To do that, we need criticism. Thus, *to make better games we need good criticism* (see Table 1). The next logical question is: are we doing a good job in 'analyzing, classifying, interpreting, or evaluating' videogames? Are our reviews "critical" or not? Is the practice of game criticism effective? In other words, is our current critique of games "good"?

Table 1. The game criticism syllogism.

- To make better games we need to define what 'better' means
- To define what better means we need criticism
- ***Thus, to make better games we need good criticism***

1.3 HOW WE GOT HERE OR THE SO-CALLED CRITICISM

Apparently, we are overwhelmed with critiques. Countless websites, magazines, all sorts of publications... Criticism appears pervasive and ubiquitous. The truth is: calling mostly videogame reviews (both online and offline) a form "criticism" is a bit of a stretch. In fact, the vast majority of video game magazines are simply "magalogs", official and/or unofficial catalogs for publishers and console makers. Nothing more than eye-candy infomercials in which information is treated as promotion (and vice versa). Distinguishing editorial content from advertising is becoming increasingly difficult. Advertorials proliferate. There are a variety of reasons behind this phenomenon: game magazines get most of their revenue from the same companies whose products they should impartially review... Most reviews are written by kids... The pay is extremely low... On this regard, Justin Hall (2003) notes that:

"Game publications and Web sites still mostly employ low-paid hobbyists who are easy targets of lavish marketing events that encourage inappropriate ties between game makers and game critics" (Justin Hall, 2003).

It comes as no surprise, then, that the vast majority of current videogame magazines:

- Tend to regards games as mere commercial products, "toys for boys".

- Are designed as consumer guides.
- Tend to talk about games only in terms of their technical aspects, often relying on unintelligible, esoteric, and self-referential argot.
- Are obsessed with quantitative evaluation. Games are discussed in terms of numbers, percentages, grades, and scores. Interestingly, parameters that apparently matter in games are singled out in a pseudo-scientific way: the end result is what I call the “Game Nutritional Label” logic. Ostensibly, nutritional labels tell us everything we need to know about food (proteins, carbohydrates, fat etc.), when, in fact they reveal none of the reasons why we eat in the first place. Eating is not just about nutrition, at least if you are lucky enough to live in an advanced country. A nutritional label cannot be very helpful when it comes to qualities like ‘taste’, ‘zest’, ‘aroma’, ‘consistency’, ‘texture’ of our foodstuff, the reasons why we eat in the first place.

“Quality” is still measured in terms of the games’ technical achievements. The so-called “game critics” value games in terms of “graphics-sounds-longevity-playability” (whatever those terms mean – nobody seems to agree). The assumption behind this logic is that it is possible to reify this thing called “fun” and get away with it. Cultural, aesthetical, ideological, and political implications of games are deliberately neglected, because of the myth of the neutrality of the ludic (“*Come on, man, it’s only a game!*”). Current game criticism is a perfect example of technological determinism and reductionism¹.

One example of this approach is that current game criticism tends to assume that “bigger” and “faster” hardware inevitably means “better software” because it provides us with more polygons, better frame rate, and so on (see Table 2). The apogee of this “positivistic criticism” was achieved by *Ace* magazine, a British publication of the late ‘80s [and *EDGE*’s forerunner], which pretended to estimate, foretell, and predict with pseudo-scientific accuracy, the fun a player would have had with a specific game after one minute, one hour, one day, one month, one year. The “nutritional label” took the form of a nicely laid out chart/graph/diagram.

Table 2. The ‘science’ of current game criticism

- It assumes that new technologies (read: better tools) are the primary cause of major changes at a game level.
- **Thus, to make better games you just need better hardware.**

¹ For an interesting discussion on technological determinism, see, for example, Carl Mitcham, *Thinking Through Technology: The Path Between Engineering and Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994 and Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, Routledge, London, 1999.

An interesting consequence is that the vast majority of game magazines tend to devalue the “present” of gaming in order to emphasize a “behind-the-corner future”. More specifically, they talk about specific or generic game “revolution” as a dramatic and “inevitable” driving force, the “impact” of which will “lead to” deep and “far-reaching” effects and “consequences”. In this paradigm, technology is presented as an autonomous, messianic force.

Drawing a parallel with movie criticism, it is as if the quality of a movie depended only by its special effects, as film journal *Cinefex* does. But *Cinefex* is the exception to the rule. In game criticism, however, all the magazines are modelled after *Cinefex*. Where are the *Film Comment*, *Sight & Sound*, and *Cahiers du Cinema* of videogames? Movie criticism had its Andrew Sarris, Pauline Kael, Robert Warshaw and many more. Music criticism had its Lester Bangs.

What about game criticism²?

1.4 HOW TELEVISION STUDIES CAN HELP US MAKING SENSE OF GAMES

In his seminal work on TV studies, *Television Culture* (1987), John Fiske identifies three possible forms of reading television texts (program, sitcoms, series etc.). Level 1, which he calls ‘REALITY’, comprises codes such as the appearance, dress, make up, environment, behaviour, speech, gestures etc. These are textual codes that represent reality. Those which are perceived as ‘realistic’ (especially in film and television) are routinely experienced as if they were recordings or direct reproductions of reality rather than as representations in the form of codes. At level two are the technical and electronically recorded codes of REPRESENTATION, camerawork, lighting, editing, music, sound etc. which transmit and shape the REALITY codes into narrative, character, conflict, dialogue, action setting etc.

Finally, there is “Level 3”, IDEOLOGY, in which elements of Level 1 and Level 2 are organized into coherence and social acceptability by the ideological codes, such as individualism, patriarchy, race, class, materialism, and capitalism (see Table 3).

Table 3. John Fiske’s reading of television texts (1987)

FIRST LEVEL	Textual codes that represent reality	Appearance,	dress,	make	up,
REALITY		environment,	behaviour,	speech,	

² Every once in a while, we read brilliant great pieces on games by casual players. One recent example is Chuck Klosterman’s reading of *The Sims* in “Sex, Drugs and Cocoa Puffs” (2003). Highly recommended, although I could not take his views on soccer...

		gestures...
SECOND LEVEL REPRESENTATION	Technical codes that encode the textual codes which transmit the conventional representational codes which shape the representation of, for instance, narrative, conflict, character, active, dialogue, setting etc.	Camera, lighting, editing, music, sound...
THIRD LEVEL IDEOLOGY	Ideological codes in which the previous elements are organized into coherence and social acceptability by the ideological codes,	Such as those of: individualism, patriarchy, race, class, materialism, and capitalism.

Ironically, game criticism never quite made it to the “third place”. It’s relatively good in describing the rules of the game and the technical aspects of games, but it has never really told us anything else. We know that videogames, just like television shows, are “cultural agents” and “circulator of meanings”, but current game criticism is pretty useless in explaining the interrelation of games with other formations – cultural, social, and aesthetic. One of the reasons is that game reviewers are so used to familiar conventions in our everyday use of video games that the codes involved often seem “transparent” to them and the medium itself appears to be “neutral”. Thus, the *medium* of the video game is characterized by instrumentalist thinking as purely a means to an end (“fun”), and the specific *text* is regarded as a mere pastime, an innocuous hobby. Bottom line: the status of the text as *text* - its “textuality” and materiality, is lessened.

Our games are becoming more and more complex and rich in meanings. With titles like *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar), *Manhunt* (Rockstar), *Fugitive Hunter: War on Terror* (Encore Software/Black Ops Ent.), *Kuma War*, *Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six* (Ubisoft), *America’s Army*, *Republic: The Revolution* (Elixir Studios), *Full Spectrum Warrior* (Pandemic Studios) and even *The Sims* (Maxis/Electronic Arts), we just cannot afford to stop at level 2.

In other words, while videogames “evolved” in the last thirty years, criticism did not improve at all. You can easily tell the difference between the original *Grand Theft Auto* and *Grand Theft Auto 3: Vice City*. Compare and contrast a magazine from the early 80s with the last issue of magazine “X”. If you see any discrepancy you get a bonus.

At this point, somebody usually raises a hand and objects: this persistence is a sign that game criticism is perfect the way it is now. It’s the “*it ain’t broken, so don’t fix it*” argument.

Which does not really make much sense: just because we thought that the Earth was at the center of the universe for centuries does not mean we were right in the first place. Were we?

The bottom line is this: Professional game critics do not really explain why games work, how games work, and what effect they have on people. Nor they seem to care. They are actually promoting the ghettoizing of games.

I think we need a *paradigm shift*. We need new ways of thinking about games. Ways that go beyond the usual close focus on technical issues and functionality of this version or that new version. Ways that do not judge the quality of games in terms of feature-comparison charts, shopping-list like set of characteristics...

Introducing...

1.5 THE PLEASURE AND SORROWS OF GAME STUDIES

In the last few years we have witnessed the emergence of a new academic discipline, game studies or ludology. The new field has recently gone “mainstream” after the Associated Press recently ran a story that was then picked up by all the major American newspapers, including the *The New York Times* (“Deconstructing the Video Game”).

What the *New York Times* did not tell is that:

- a) The field is young and the situation, like that in a video game, is very fluid.
- b) Game studies is an umbrella term. Under this definition you’ll find everything from cultural studies to semiotics, from hypertext theory to sociology of communication.
- c) Which also means that there is some good stuff and lots of bad stuff. Remember the Theodore Sturgeon’s Axiom (“90% or everything is crap”).
- d) When you take a close look at game studies, you’ll notice that video games are discussed heterogeneously (more on this later).
- e) As a corollary, divergent, and contrasting paradigms are emerging. Expect major schisms in the future. Different factions will talk about games in very different ways. Which is not bad *per se*. On the contrary, every major discipline uses different theoretical tools to explain the world...
- f) ...But the idea of creating a common vocabulary between the Ivory Tower and the Game Industry is a chimera. Heck, you won’t get a common vocabulary even within the game scholars. Each faction will make and use its own. And signifiers are not always commensurable: you might end up constructing huge vessels of words that do not really communicate with each other, incompatible tools that might cause the system to crash.

The greater risk, however, is that game studies will remain a niche, an anomaly, in both the academic and the game worlds. If game scholars rely on cryptic language and obscure methodologies in discussing games, making the “epistemology of ludus”³ useless, their impact will be irrelevant. Only the selected few who read Derrida, Zizek, Baudrillard *and* play video games as well will benefit from it (according to statistics, it’s less than 0.0001% of the world population).

The hazard here is game studies producing hulks of verbiage that will be perceived as mental masturbation both by the game design world (“These guys using semiotics to talk about games scare me”, as Chris Crawford put it) and the game players/fans (“These Ivory Tower guys need to drink a big tall glass of shut the fuck up” – I’m paraphrasing a line from Zack Snyder’s *Dawn of the Dead* here).

The risk, in other words, is the “Balkanization” of videogame criticism. This happens when the factions consider only their ways of reading games as the “right one” (“We are the good guys, they are the bad guys”; “You can quote Baudrillard as many times as you can, but I’m gonna kick your ass at *Counter-Strike* anyhow”).

Rather than exacerbate the conflict it would be useful to find some sort of middle ground. In order to do so, it might be useful to go back to the basics, bracket everything, reset the system and start over. It’s question time again, and, paraphrasing Raymond Carver...

1.6 “WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT GAMES?”

In theory, there are no ambiguities.

In fact, vagueness proliferates.

In 1964, Justice Potter Stewart tried to explain “hard-core” pornography, (legally synonymous with obscenity) in these terms “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced . [b]ut I know it when I see it . . . “

In a sense, the videogame is a bit like pornography: easy to recognize but hard to define.

As you all know.

I would like to indicate three possible explanations of what we mean by “videogame”. Before we go any further, however, I would like to clarify that I am well aware that these three definitions do not exhaust any set of possibilities, nor that any of these models excludes characteristics given under another heading. They simply form notes on work going on.

³ Yes, it is supposed to be ironic.

a) **Videogames are “texts”**. Just like comic books, movies, novels and so on. This definition presupposes two elements: *legibility* and *completeness*. Most broadly, this term is used to refer to anything which can be “read” for meaning. A text is a series of signs (I’m using the word sign in a very broad sense here: sign as words, images, sounds, gestures etc.). It is produced by assembling different elements that might have no meaning individually, but that acquire a *gestalt*, some recognizable shape, when considered as a system. A text can be dissected, defined, or framed in a relatively easy way. It is constructed and interpreted with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication. To think of a videogame-as-text you might picture an image of a videogame stuffed in a *box* on a shelf in some store, waiting to be bought and played by a *customer*. Problems arise when you open that box and you start playing. As we all know, games do not like to stay inside a box. They are those action figures in Joe Dante’s film *Small Soldiers* (1998). Toys just want to have fun. The box does not make the game, while often the game makes (it into) the box. “Toy-like people make be boy-like” (Massive Attack).

b) Others suggest that **Videogames are “discourses”**. A discourse is defined as “an extended verbal expression in speech or writing” or “an extended communication (often *interactive*) dealing with some particular topic” (which is interesting *per se*, because many – including Chris Crawford – define interactivity as a form of dialogue or conversation). In semiotics, a discourse is defined as “a system of representation consisting of a set of representational codes (including a distinctive interpretative repertoire of concepts, tropes, and myths) for constructing and maintaining particular forms of reality within the ontological domain or topic defined as relevant to its concerns. Representational codes thus reflect *relational principles* underlying the symbolic order of the “discursive field”⁴ (Daniel Chandler, 2001).

c) **Videogames are “practices”** (or Signifying practices): These are the meaning-making behaviors in which people engage (including the production and reading of texts) following

⁴ This is extremely important. Theorists like Michel Foucault argued that dominant tropes within the discourse of a particular historical period determine what can be known, what constitutes the *understanding* of an age. A range of discursive positions is available at any given time, reflecting many determinants (economic, political, sexual etc.). This approach would lead you to study what are the dominant signifiers in videogames today (e.g. violence, sport, fantasy) and the *marginalized* ones. We would have many different interpretations: Game structuralists deterministically see the subject – e.g. the player of games - as the product of the available discourses. Games make the player. Hard-core ludologists tend to be structuralists. They are mostly interested in the formal structure of games. Then there are game constructivists, who allow for the possibility of negotiation or resistance. The players and the games create meaning. Think cultural studies applied to games. Finally, there are poststructuralists: they deny any meaning (or more provocatively any reality) outside of discourses. In other words, there is no reality outside the games/Matrix...

particular conventions or rules of construction and interpretation. This reading stresses on the importance of socio-cultural contexts. Saying that videogames are “practices” means that what happens in *front* of the screen is more important than what happens on the screens. In other words: lives *before* the screen matter more than lives *onto* the screen. It also means that the way people engage with games is more important than the games per se. So you start wondering why some game tribes adopt some titles and reject others thereby demonstrating that marketing is not an exact science (thanks God). In this sense, videogames are understood as rites, practices that oscillate between the sacred and the profane.

That videogames are a complex “thing” or “phenomenon” is clear to anybody who has been trying to understand them. Among other things, game scholars are still divided between people who consider them a form of narrative and people who do not consider them a form of narrative, but I will spare you.

1.7 A TETRA APPROACH TO GAMES

While we are at it, why don’t we try to identify possible approaches to understanding videogames? So, let’s say that there could be four different ways – they might be many more, but let’s pretend we brought them down to four. And since we’re fooling around, let’s name these four possible theorizations of games: “Fashion model”, “*Politique*”, and “Basket”, “My, myself, and Eye”⁵. They are not mutually exclusive and could coexist within the same analysis of a text. Again, I make no special claim is made that they exhaust any set of possibilities, nor that any of these models excludes characteristics given under another heading: they simply form notes on work going on.

1) *Fashion Model*

It’s fairly deductive. It assumes there are cultural models that inform single texts. Example: There is this thing called “horror”, described as “an intense, painful feeling of repugnance and fear”. Horror is also a very viable narrative genre which relies on well known iconographic, thematic and linguistic elements. Videogames did not invent anything: they just adapt these cultural models or narratives to the specificity of the medium. Thus, *Resident Evil* is not important per se. What matters is the cultural model that informs it. As a text, *Resident Evil* is just an application of a cultural model.

2) *Politique*

⁵ I would like to thank Dr. Guido Ferraro at IULM University in Milan for helping me to formulate this taxonomy.

This approach, on the other hand, stresses the importance of the text *per se*. It assumes that there is an author – Shinki Mikami in *Resident Evil*'s case – and that this author is trying to communicate something to me. He is telling me that a corporation called Umbrella has created a powerful virus that might destroy humankind, turning the living creatures into zombies. Considering a game as an act of communication originating from an author requires a lot of attention from the user. I – the gamer - should take notice of all the elements that Mikami chose to insert into the game. Nothing is casual. Everything is there for a specific reason. I should pay attention to **recurring elements** (the keys are the key), **apparent anomalies** (the fact that very different objects occupy the same space in the inventory) and **the aspects** Mikami stresses most (like the cinematics that give some sort of narrative coherence to the game). If I'm really good, I will identify the correspondences, parallels, or similarities in the properties, patterns or relations of the structural *elements* at different levels *within the same structure* (game) or between *different structures*. The trick is: I find these homologies, as they are called, and I'll be able to decode the inner logic of the game. It is worth the trouble, you know.

By the way, the term “Politique” comes from cinema studies. The term Auteur was first coined in January 1954 when Francois Truffaut wrote an article entitled “Une certaine tendance du cinema francais” (“A certain tendency of the French Cinema”) which was published in the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema*. This article focused on what he describes as the 'politique des Auteurs' (*Auteur policy*) which proposes that the films of directors should be studied, and their personal view of the world discovered through their individual *mise-en-scene*, themes, values, and overall style. During the 1950s and 1960s film critics started to discuss Auteur Theory and tracing the personal style of a Director through their works. American film theorist Andrew Sarris, who later developed this initial policy and formed what is now termed the “Auteur Theory”, claimed that the director has the overall creative and artistic responsibility for the film. Therefore, Sarris argued, it is the director the “true author” of the film, whose distinctive artistic vision is the major creative force of movie. Film theorists and critics have long argued over which directors are 'Auteurs' and which are 'nonAuteurs.' According to Sarris “the strong director imposes his own personality on a film.... The Auteur Theory values the personality of a director precisely because of the barriers to its expression” (Andrew Sarris, 1996).

Now, if you substitute the word ‘film director’ with ‘game designer’ you can still have an author theory. In the past you had games designers as authors who were also production workers, not just personalities, meaning that they personally carried out every aspect of production⁶. In conjunction with the concept of the 'Author as Personality' it could be legitimate to think as the 'author' of a game a number of key contributors (the programmers, the writer, the sound designer), and therefore one game can form the basis of a group of games to be studied and examined under a number of 'authors' groups of games. Unsurprisingly, the game industry has been establishing a pantheon of game designers that are considered authors for quite some time now. I'm referring to the Interactive Academy of Arts and Science's Hall of Fame that includes Peter Molyneux, Yu Suzuki, Will Wright, John Carmack, Sid Meier, Hironobu Sakaguchi, and Shigeru Miyamoto. This approach - if it does not degenerate into a cult of personality - could help us to understand games better. It would concentrate on the prominent role of the designer, a role that the industry traditionally neglected – as even today most gamers talk about

⁶ See also Ellen Cheshire, “The Singer or the Song?” at www.kamera.ko.uk/features/authorshipo.html.

games in terms of brands. It used to be the same in the movie industry. Things have changed, apparently.

3) *Basket case*

The third model is called “**basket**”, which does not have much to do with the sport. Well, in a sense, it does. What is a basket? It is at least three things: “a container”, “The amount that a basket can hold” and “a score in basketball made by throwing the ball through the hoop”. By naming the third model “basket” I mean that when we approach something like a videogame each of us carry a basket. A basket which is never empty: it contains our cultural, ideological and ludic knowledge, biases, assumptions etc. Think of Little Red Riding Hood: she goes to see her Grandma and she carries a basket, full of goodies. This approach assumes that when we encounter a videogame we can’t pretend that we do not carry a basket. On the contrary, it is the basket which makes our encounters with texts meaningful. So when I approach *Resident Evil*, if my basket contained some or most of George A. Romero’s movies I would enjoy the text even more than if I did not. Competence here does not rely only in pressing buttons at the right time or finding the right way through the maze. Competence also means being able to catch all the references to other texts that, inevitably, influenced the author, from *Dawn of the Dead* to *Return of the Living Dead* (the T-Virus as a reference to Trioxin, the virus that causes corpses to reanimate), up to movies like *The Crazies* (1973). These intertextual connections make you appreciate the game even more. In a sense, getting a reference – getting the bigger picture – is like scoring a point in a cultural basketball game.

Bottom Line: within this model, the text becomes a *pastiche*, a fancy postmodern term that roughly means “collage” of highly codified elements and texts. The author simply becomes a *filter*: in order to create a text, he does not simply picks some generic cultural models, but he consciously and unconsciously transforms, adapts, and reinvents pre-existing texts. The implication is that the author does not fully control the text. He is somehow subordinated to his basket.

4) *Me, myself and Eye*⁷

The fourth model rejects all the previous ones as useless, pointless, and – especially in regard to the last one – as snotty and arrogant. This approach emphasizes the *experiential* dimension of the game, the phenomenological aspect. It is the most direct, empirical, pragmatic approach. What really matters here is not just what happens in the game, but what happens *in* the player, who is actively constructing the meaning of the text. It is the player – not the author, not culture – that perceives *Resident Evil* as a truly different game. A scary, unsettling, slightly terrifying experience. *Resident Evil* does not tell a story “in general” – and I could not care less about Jill Valentine, Chris Redfield and the other stereotypical characters – *Resident Evil* tells my story, the story of my experience with the interface – *man, it is cumbersome sometimes, but it works* – the use of specific linguistic-stylistic conventions – *man, it uses a third person but it as involving at any FPS I’ve played* – the way I play the game – *man, I played late at night, in the darkness, alone, headphones on, and when I saw the Licker, gosh, I jumped two feet un in the air!* – the way the game plays me – *Dude, have you heard the music? I mean, it rocks*. Don’t

⁷ Trivia: “Right is wrong when hype is written” (De La Soul, “Me, Myself and I”, 1992).

get me wrong, I don't want to present this fourth model as culturally limited. On the contrary, this is a "the Emperor is naked!", down-to-earth approach that can shed more light on game than others. A "me, myself and eye" guy who goes to see a retrospective on Picasso and does not read the description tags of the paintings because what really matters is not *who* Picasso depicted, but rather *how* he did it. This down to earth approach is shared by the guy who goes to see a series of Michelangelo's marble sculptures, stops in front of a statue of a Greek goddess and says, "*Gee, what a nice ass*". The fact that this rock evokes such an emotional and personal response means that Michelangelo achieved his goals, on every possible level. His art speaks to anybody. Videogames are no different. To paraphrase Matthew Fueller (2003), games "construct sensoriums [...], or ways of seeing, knowing and doing in the world that at once contain a model of that part of the world it ostensibly pertains to and that also shape it every time it is used" (p. 19).

2. "GOTCHA, BUT... WHAT COMES NEXT?"

So, now that I have described what I perceive as a problem in the game industry – the lack of cultural criticism of games – I'll quickly describe what we are doing in Milan. It's a shameless promotional stunt, but also a recruiting tool.

In 2003, Dr. Gianni Canova and I launched "*Ludologica. Videogames d'autore*", a new series of books that honour the most significant video games ever produced. Available in two formats (Monographs and Readers), these volumes discuss video games from a broad academic and critical perspective, setting characteristics, themes and techniques in context and exploring each game's significance. "*Ludologica. Videogames d'Autore*" is part of a larger project on video game and new media research funded by Libera Università di Lingue e Comunicazione (IULM)/Cariplo Foundation in Milan, Italy.

Ludologica is not concerned with offering grand-theory panoramas and generic summations of what games are. In these paperbacks, distinguished game critics, scholars, and avid gamers explore the production and reception of their chosen titles in the context of an argument about the games social, cultural, and aesthetic importance. Each book presents the author's insights into a game and its creator selected from a list of the most enduring and influential titles of the last 40 years. These are not conventional game reviews or game guides. Rather, they situate the games in terms of the broader cultural debate that they informed.

I do not really believe in the idea of a canon, but it is hard to deny that some games are more relevant than others. I do not necessarily equate "relevance" with "commercial success". I consider "relevant" those games that have the exceptional ability to shape the contemporary imagination. I care most about games that are able to redefine their genre, introduce new ideas, make us rethink about the way we interact with the electric shadows that float on the screen.

These are games that, in many cases, transcend the ludic sphere to become icons of our age. Texts that entertain, stimulate, and demand our attention. This is why, for instance, we are publishing a book on Fumito Ueda's *Ico*. As you probably know, this PlayStation2 game was a commercial fiasco. Yet, *Ico* changed the way games can arouse an emotional reaction from the player. We would not have ever had Ubisoft's *Prince of Persia: Tides of Time* without Sony's *Ico*.

With Ludologica we are trying to create the video game equivalent of the British Film Institute book series, little gems like. Camille Paglia's reading of Hitchcock's *The Birds*, Laura Mulvey's appreciation of *Citizen Kane*, Salman Rushdie's interpretation of *The Wizard of Oz*, Amy Taubin's *Taxi Driver*, Iain Sinclair's *Crash*, Mark Kermode's *The Exorcist*, Scott Bukatman's *Blade Runner* and so on. These authors in this series showed me completely different films from the ones I saw.

These books made me appreciate movies much more than grand constructions such as Metz's *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (1974) which tried to explain everything but often ended up utterly useless. I do not see the point, on an epistemological level, of talking about “games” in general terms because it can lead to *qui pro quo* and misunderstandings. Even on a practical level, the issue is relevant: I am constantly asked by journalists: “Are videogames violent?”, “Are videogames 'good' for us?” But you simply can't answer these questions in one line. *Grand Theft Auto* is not *The Sims*. *Fifa Soccer* is not *Deus Ex*. Besides, how do you define “violence”? How is “game” violence different from “movie” violence and “real” violence?

While I believe that a totalizing theory of games could be functional (and chimerical at the same time), I think that a focus on single texts can be helpful. With Ludologica we are also trying to contextualize game criticism, and show how it evolved and changed though time. Video games are teenagers. Game studies in all forms are toddlers that demand care and attention. The truth is that we are not exactly studying games.

We are studying how to study games: the epistemology of the electroludic.

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