

Videogames as a mean of transport

by Matteo Bittanti

Videogames have profoundly altered the contemporary media panorama. First and foremost videogames are a means of transport that project us into alternative dimensions. The theories of narrative are of little use when attempting to understand their nature. It is much more relevant to look to architecture or urbanistic studies. "Cut" Vladimir Propp, "Paste" Le Corbusier. Videogames are a style of representation, a system of socialization and a simulation of a journey. An exploration, a wander, crossing space. And their spaces are by definition transient, ready to be configured and explored at will. In a certain sense, they do not differ radically from the modern world. A cognitive map of the digital era, videogames introduce new geographies, topographies, places and hyperplaces made of numeric sequences sheathed in texture. In the virtual journey of a videogame the player acknowledges and accepts his or her own precarious status and fragility, journeying into the unknown, aware that during the trip he or she may die and be reborn dozens of times. Press "X" to respawn[1]. Setting out on a virtual journey means being open to the concept of plurality – artificial plurality, in the case of non-player characters – or concrete plurality – in multiplayer games and MMOGs[2], where behind the image there is meatware[3]. In this case videogames propel us into an 'authentic' encounter with another being, and the film-like narration merely simulates that encounter. Videogames require us to get our hands dirty; at the movies you can keep your gloves on. As the simulation of a journey, videogames resist attempts at generalization and defy classification. The journey experience is in fact subjective, individual and personal, even in the era of virtual mass tourism. My trip through Vice City in Grand Theft Auto is both similar and radically different from that of any other traveler.

Landscapes in videogames are a work in progress, a flow. We are always "in transit". Videogames can only be frozen when paused, or in screenshots. To paraphrase Godard, we could say that if videogames are reality at 30/60 frames a second, screenshots are reality at one frame a second. Mais le 'screenshot' c'est ne pas le jeux video. Screenshots – fragments of the gaming experience – are the virtual heir of the postcard. Their function is to bear witness to the trip, to capture the flow in a single image. Like non-places, videogames' hyper-places give rise to a series of performances which recall the practices involved in travel, consumption, exchange. Playing means taking part in a performance within a flow of images. Videogames are played and measured in units of time. The record of a videogame is a mere question of aesthetics. Videogames redefine the concept of space, creating new layers of reality which add to, replace (in the most dangerous forms of addiction), or overlap with our more immediate ones. Videogames give the player the chance to live out alternative experiences vicariously, thus transforming carrier into player, but only thanks to the mediation of the screen, as both interface (monitor) and protection (shield).

Notes:

1. Respawn: Spawn (or respawn) is a term used in videogames which indicates the creation of an entity, which may be a playable character, a non-playable character or an object. Respawning is a further act of creation of a player or enemy after death, destruction or at the end of a level.
2. MMOG: Massive(ly) Multiplayer Online Games are computer role playing games played online. Thousands of players can interact, interpreting characters which evolve together with the persistent world that surrounds them, and which they inhabit.
3. Meatware: The term meatware indicates the integration between the physical construct known as the central nervous system and the mental construct known as the human mind. The concept represents an application of the hardware/software dichotomy conceived for electronic machines to human beings. One of the first people to popularize the term was the sci-fi writer and university lecturer Rudy Rucker in his 1987 novel of the same name.